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# Role Ambiguity of Counseling Supervisors

Aaron Gabriel Shames  
*Old Dominion University*

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# **ROLE AMBIGUITY OF COUNSELING SUPERVISORS**

By

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A Dissertation Submitted  
to the Faculty of Old Dominion University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **ROLE AMBIGUITY OF COUNSELING SUPERVISORS**

**Aaron Gabriel Shames**

**Old Dominion University, 2014**

**Dissertation Chair: Dr. Theodore P. Remley, Jr.**

Supervisors often find themselves in the midst of ambiguity seeking clarity of their role and professional identity within the counseling field. Supervisors wear many hats, the most prominent ones being educator, counselor, and gatekeeper for the profession. Counseling supervisors are expected to establish and maintain a complex blend of professional, educational, and therapeutic relationships with their supervisees. This process involving multiple roles often presents conflicts. One such conflict experienced by supervisors has been termed role ambiguity. The purpose of this phenomenological inquiry was to explore what experiences counseling supervisors have with role ambiguity and how they experience role ambiguity. Themes emerged from the data related to the perceptions counseling supervisors have about their identity, attitudes regarding the clarity and ambiguity of their roles, and their emotionality while experiencing role ambiguity.

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**B”H**

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### Overview: Researcher Connection to the Topic

Taken from the Hebrew word *tora*, meaning teaching or instruction, the Torah is the overall body of Jewish teachings that encompasses Jewish law, practice, and tradition. The Five Books of Moses (also referred to as The Bible or The Old Testament) makes up the *Written Torah* however there is also a component said to be the *Oral Torah*, which is a commentary on the Written Torah. As its name implies the Oral Torah was said to be transmitted verbally from teacher to student for many generations until approximately 200 C.E. (common era) when Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi authored the first compilation of the oral law called the *Mishnah* ([www.chabad.org](http://www.chabad.org)).

The Mishnah consists of 63 volumes. One of these volumes, called in Hebrew, *Pirkei Avot*, is devoted to ethical teachings. *Pirkei Avot* is translated in English as, *The Ethics of our Fathers*, and is divided into six chapters (Kravitz & Olitzky, 1993). It is a passage in Chapter five that sparked my interest in the phenomena of role ambiguity and counseling supervision. Verse seven states:

Seven things distinguish a fool and seven things distinguish a wise person. The wise person does not speak in the presence of one who is wiser. The wise person does not interrupt when another is speaking. The wise person is not in a hurry to answer. The wise person asks according to the subject and answers according to the Law. The wise person speaks about the first matter first and the last matter last. If there is something the wise person has not heard [and therefore does not know], the wise person says, "I have never heard [of it]." The wise person acknowledges what is true. The opposite of all these qualities is found in a fool (p. 80).

It is these seven traits of a wise person and fool that subsequently became the stimulus of my research study. For the past seven years I have been living in the Ghent neighborhood of Norfolk, VA. The private practice that I work as a psychotherapist is a



short distance from my home and Old Dominion University, where I was a doctoral student earning a degree in counselor education and supervision, is nearby as well. Being Jewish I consider myself fortunate to be in walking distance to three synagogues, one of which I am a member. There is also a Chabad House where I attend religious classes and meet with Rabbis for Halakic consultation.

Chabad is a Hebrew acronym for the three intellectual faculties of a Jew- *chochmah* (wisdom), *binah* (comprehension), and *da'at* (knowledge; [www.chabad.org](http://www.chabad.org)). About three years ago my secular learning and Halakic learning ran into each other and I became anxious. The first time I took on the supervisor role I experienced an uncomfortable shock. The anxiety came from my unexplained inability to easily resolve my internal conflict when deciding to verbalize my knowing and also not knowing. I had never before been conflicted by hesitation with acknowledging the truth no matter if it was expressing my confidences or ignorance in my professional roles and I certainly did not want the supervisee to perceive me as a fool; I wanted to be seen as a model for professional counseling and supervision.

I have been a licensed professional counselor in the field for several years and considered myself wise in the ways of establishing and maintaining a therapeutic relationship. I became wise in the tenets of effective education by taking classes in learning modalities and class facilitation and had experience in their practice, and I was wise to the function and performance of evaluation. Coming from a stance of not knowing has helped me join with others to enter a forum where exploration, revelation, and collaboration are promoted and safe to thrive. I knew myself as someone who does not interrupt or deny my client or student's expression of thoughts and feelings, I do not

hurry with my questioning and answering as to minimize the risk of haste in decision making that leads to unethical practice, and my credentials provides me an order for my attending behaviors: the first matter being client welfare and enhancement of the quality of life in society, the second is promoting the development of professional counselors, the third is for advancing the counseling profession, and then lastly to speak for and promote respect for human dignity and diversity (ACA Code of Ethics, 2005).

I had completed the required coursework in counseling supervision and counselor education and as part of my doctoral degree requirements I took on the role of clinical supervisor to master's-level counseling students. I had knowledge of the goals of supervision as well as the program policies and procedures. I knew that as clinical supervisor I was to facilitate a relationship made from professional, educational, and therapeutic components. Supervisees are counselors-in-training meeting with me to learn or strengthen their own counseling skills, become exposed to the counseling profession and its consumers, and have their efforts evaluated for ensuring their practice is in accordance with ethical standards and competently delivered. I thought I had comprehended what it was to be a counselor supervisor, or did I?

How could I evaluate counseling skills I didn't know? How could I be an effective gatekeeper if I didn't keep track of the keys? If I already knew things how could I entice the supervisee to share? And how do I know if the supervisee's ratio of received education, counsel, and supervision is meeting professional standards? I consulted with Theodor Reik (1948) via his text, *Listening with the Third Ear*, and he advised me to have courage. He stated that it took courage to suffer through the unknown since ambiguity elicits anxiety, pain, and discomfort. I bravely continued to tolerate the

ambiguity and go on with my quest to resolve my conflict with this unknown phenomenon.

### **Brief Summary of Relevant Literature**

Supervision researchers, Kadushin and Harkness (2002), identified *Supervision and Education in Charity* the first text about social work supervision, which was published in 1904. Its author Jeffrey Bracket referred to supervision as, “The control and coordination function of a State Board of Supervisors, a State Board of Charities, or a State Board of Control” (1904). Around that era Sigmund Freud and other psychoanalysts were engaging in supervision as well, but not with an administrative focus. According to Freud himself (1914) they were concerned with learning, practicing, and spreading the knowledge of psychoanalysis.

The evaluative focus of supervision, educative component, and support for persons in the supervisor role merged in 1981 when the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) and American Counseling Association (ACA) cooperatively established the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). Supervision expert Janine Bernard (2005) named this as the point in which supervision became a distinct subfield within the profession of counseling.

The literature regarding counseling supervision was consistent with the ACES *Best Practices* (2011) by their indicating that supervisors possess a strong professional-counselor identity. Researchers Edwards (2013) and also White & Queener (2003) stated that supervisors rely on their experience with the counseling role to help with their responsibility of establishing and maintaining an effective supervisory relationship.

Supervisors also lean on their counseling skills to assist supervisees self-disclose about their work with clients. Furthermore, O'Donovan, Halford, and Walters (2011), reported that it was supervisors' counseling characteristics that helped supervisors empathize and process supervisees' emotional responses to clients.

Lizzio and Wilson (2002) published research regarding the role of teacher that supervisors inherit when working with counselors-in-training. I reviewed literature indicating the need for supervisors to not only be competent counselors to facilitate a working relationship but to also be able to teach counseling knowledge and skills. The professional literature showed that supervisors ought to be able to teach supervisees effective practices and also promote professionalism, cultural competence, and ethical matters related to the helping profession (Westerfield, 2008). As supervisees learn counseling skills and develop a professional identity, supervisors also must take on the role of gatekeeper to ensure that the supervisee is evaluated according to professional or organizational standards.

The professional literature on supervision makes the point that it is the evaluator role that differentiates the supervision relationship from the counselor/client relationship (Cheon, 2009). The evaluation component tasks supervisors with being assertive and clear with feedback so that supervisees receive: critiques about what they're doing effectively, potentially harmfully, and indications of areas for professional growth. Bogo et. al. (2007), and Milne (2009) indicated that the key function of supervisors is gatekeeping for the profession, and encouraged the use of handbooks, ethical codes, policies, and other assessments when evaluating supervisees. Supervisors are mandated to perform these multiple roles (Cheon, Blumer, Shih, Murphy, & Sato, 2009). The roles of

educator, evaluator, and counselor overlap however, and often times conflict. These overlapping roles are factors that lead to the experience of role ambiguity.

According to Adobor (2006) supervisors are faced with an abundant number of cues to take into account while in the supervisory relationship. Supervisors must protect clients and the public, attend to the learning needs of supervisees as they develop counseling skills, and role model and act as gatekeepers for the counseling profession. Nelson et al. (2010) published their finding that appropriately balancing structure and process, cognition and emotion, and directive and nondirective interventions can be difficult for supervisors. Supervisors are ethically obligated to juggle these roles however, and role ambiguity has been discovered to be a native aspect of counseling supervision (Clegg, 2010).

Although the literature is consistent with acknowledging the phenomenon of role ambiguity, supervisors' reactions to it vary. McLain (2009) called role ambiguity a *barrier to understanding* and Dugas, Gosselin, and Ladouceur (2001) reported that supervisors respond to role ambiguity with worry and panic. Researchers like Korinek and Kimball (2003) also noted that supervisors reported discomfort and anxiety when experiencing role ambiguity.

Aversion was not the only reaction reported in the literature. Research by McLain (2009) found that a growing number of supervisors were attracted to role ambiguity. Tolerating role ambiguity, advocated by Szajnberg (2011), has been found to increase *emotional robustness*. Positive responses to role ambiguity were also found in research that focuses on what Clegg (2010) called the *reality of uncertainty*.

Supervision experts Bernard and Goodyear (2004) stated that conflict is unavoidable within the supervision relationship however it is the supervisor's preference for certainty or ambiguity that correlates with their attending actions. Research has shown that supervisors' actions are affected by role ambiguity. DeRoma, Martin, and Kessler (2003) found that supervisors who do not tolerate ambiguity would often provide narrow solutions to problems rather than considering a range of possibilities, desire premature closure, and enforce rigidity. Distorting information and low toleration for diversity were also linked to negative associations with role ambiguity (Yurtserver, 2001).

Cheon, Blumer, Shih, Murphy, and Sato (2009) have published studies that indicate the opposite of what DeRoma, Martin, and Kessler (2003) and Yurserver (2001) found. Toleration of role ambiguity has also been observed as an indicator of supervisor resilience and a root force for promoting constructive and explorative dialogues, cultural competence, and a factor for establishing a safe and collaborative environment for supervision (Spafford, et al., 2007).

The literature revealed varied attributes of role ambiguity, mostly utilizing a quantitative methodology. The professional literature was missing a qualitative study that explored the perceptions and experiences counseling supervision providers had with role ambiguity. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences and perceptions that counseling supervisors had with role ambiguity with the aim of capturing the essence of the role ambiguity phenomenon.

### **Conceptual Framework**

A conceptual framework includes the purpose for the study, a description of the topic, and significance of the study. It is the concepts, theories, personal and professional

assumptions, and prior research that collectively informs the topic to be studied (Maxwell, 2005). This study explored the experiences and perceptions counseling supervisors had with role ambiguity. The phenomenon of role ambiguity has become an important topic in the counseling field and more specifically counseling supervision, as guidelines for supervision practices has been adopted into the *ACA Code of Ethics* (2005) and CACREP standards (2009). The experience of role ambiguity has been expanded to not only being felt by supervisees but also counseling supervisors themselves (Fall & Sutton, 2004).

There have been numerous quantitative studies with a pre-test and post-test format that have shown role ambiguity's effect within the supervisory relationship (Brunetto, Farr-Wharton, & Shacklock, 2011; Campbell, & Lingard, 2007; Culbreth, Scarborough, Banks-Johnson, & Solomon, 2005; Itzhaky, 2001; Spafford, Schryer, & Kemery, 2006). However, there had been no known qualitative studies that explored role ambiguity as experienced by counseling supervisors themselves. Therefore, a qualitative study, using in-depth interviews with counseling supervision providers will contribute to the body of knowledge concerning the factors that make up the essence of role ambiguity. Counseling supervisors' experiences and perceptions are especially relevant, since it is they who are the exemplars of ethical practice within the counseling profession, and it is their voice which is not adequately heard in the current quantitative body of literature.

Data from the counseling supervisors' interviews was analyzed with a phenomenological theory approach. Phenomenology assisted me with understanding the essence and meaning counseling supervisors ascribe to their lived experience with role

ambiguity (Hays & Singh, 2012). The focus of my inquiry is to describe what the participants had in common as they experience the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

Although quantitative inquiries of role ambiguity have been conducted, there is not an in-depth exploration from the supervisor's perspective about their daily-lived experiences. I considered a grounded theory design, however, the goal of the researcher is not to build a theory about how supervisors experience role ambiguity, but rather to understand the essence and meaning of their experience with role ambiguity (Creswell, 2007). This realized essence may subsequently provide a guide for decision-making and action for best practices (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Studies have shown that there are various responses to, attitudes toward, and definitions of role ambiguity; but none so far have captured the essence of the phenomenon. Therefore, a qualitative study, using interviews with supervision providers (who meet criteria), will contribute to the body of knowledge concerning factors that contribute to positive supervision outcomes.

### **Rationale for the Study**

Although the research investigating role ambiguity has not been congruent in terms of focus, the hindrance of competent and effective practice as well as risk of unethical outcomes from fractured comprehension of role ambiguity appeared to be a well-established conclusion. There are many compelling reasons to expand the knowledge and full understanding of the phenomenon of role ambiguity. The absence of research that addresses the actual essence of role ambiguity limited supervisors from having a fuller awareness and acceptance of the phenomenon that frequently confounds them.



The problems experienced by counseling supervisors are complex and it is essential to develop educative materials, policies, and guidelines for best practices to meet the needs of the emerging group of professional counseling supervisors. This group of counseling supervisors was in an ideal position to address the needs of the counseling profession by promoting their development, health, and academic functioning. Because conflicts arise in the supervisory relationship, and because it is ethically imperative to resolve such conflicts, the lack of research in this area was concerning. I used a qualitative methodology to examine counseling supervisors' experiences with role ambiguity while engaged in the supervisory relationship.

This study may serve as a foundation for future studies that aim at researching the impact and effectiveness of supervisor education and training, counseling supervisory practices, and ethical practice. I sought to uncover the essence of role ambiguity by interviewing counseling supervisors regarding their experiences and perceptions of role ambiguity. Most of the research that assesses experiences with role ambiguity has taken place in the context of pre and post tests and also comes from the supervisee's point of view and/or the researcher's own observations. This study is intended to add to the existing body of knowledge regarding the phenomenon of role ambiguity by examining the perceptions and experiences of supervisors themselves directly.

With this qualitative study I attempted to capture the voices of the supervisors who are directly affected by role ambiguity, become distracted with the conflicting roles within the supervisory role, and struggle with its resolve due to not having a full understanding of the very phenomenon that encounters them. By engaging in an in-depth examination of several counseling supervisor experiences, complimented by my own

bracketed perceptions of the phenomenon, the results may help inform a collective and accepted awareness of the essence of role ambiguity so that design of supervision training and its practice can be maintained in-line with the emerging and changing profession. It is for all these reasons that a study of the experiences and perceptions of counseling supervisors who experience role ambiguity may contribute to the body of research on the effectiveness of various supervision practices.

### **Research Questions**

This study explored two broad research questions: “What are counseling supervisors’ experiences with role ambiguity?” and, “How do counseling supervisors experience role ambiguity?”

### **Definition of Key Terms**

#### **Community Service Board**

A public body supported by and partnered with the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services that provides mental health, developmental, and substance abuse services within each city and county that establishes them (Chapter 1 of Title 37.2 of *Code of Virginia*, 2013).

#### **Counselor Educator**

A professional counselor engaged primarily in developing, implementing, and supervising the educational preparation of counselors-in-training (*ACA Code of Ethics*, 2005).

#### **Counseling Supervisor**

A professional counselor who engages in a formal relationship with a practicing counselor or counselor-in-training for the purposes of overseeing that work or clinical development (ACA *Code of Ethics*, 2005).

**Evaluator**

Supervisor role in which the supervisor exercises professional judgment based on observations and objective assessments of a supervisee's behavior to evaluate current functioning, monitor supervisee's adherence to legal and ethical standards, provide regular and systematic feedback, and select appropriate remediation for identified problems or make appropriate referrals (Chapter 35 of Title 54.1 of *Code of Virginia*, 2013).

**Phenomenology**

A research approach with the purpose of describing the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon. Focus is on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon. The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence. The researcher collects data from persons who have experienced the phenomenon and develops a composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals (Patton, 2005).

**Professional Counselor**

A person trained in the application of principles, standards, and methods of the counseling profession, including counseling interventions designed to facilitate an individual's achievement of human development goals and remediating mental,

emotional, or behavioral disorders and associated distresses that interfere with mental health and development (Chapter 35 of Title 54.1 of *Code of Virginia*, 2013).

**Role Ambiguity**

A type of role strain which occurs when shared specifications set for an expected role are incomplete, and therefore insufficient to tell the involved individual what is desired and how to do it; occurring when there is a lack of definition regarding a role, either individually or within the group ([www.psychologydictionary.org](http://www.psychologydictionary.org)). Role ambiguity denotes uncertainty about the expectations, behaviors, and consequences associated with a particular role. Specifically, a person has a need to know others' expectations of the rights, duties, and responsibilities of the role, the behaviors that will lead to fulfillment of these expectations, and the likely consequences of these role behaviors. Role ambiguity results when these three types of information are nonexistent or inadequately communicated. Organizational factors (e.g., rapidly changing organizational structures, job feedback systems) and individual factors (e.g., information processing biases) may cause role ambiguity as well ([www.blackwellreference.com](http://www.blackwellreference.com)).

**Supervisee**

A professional counselor or counselor-in-training whose counseling work or clinical skill development is being overseen in a formal supervisory relationship by a qualified trained professional (*ACA Code of Ethics*, 2005).

**Supervision**

The ongoing process performed by a supervisor who monitors the performance of the person supervised and provides regular, documented individual or group consultation,

guidance and instruction with respect to the clinical skills and competencies of the person supervised (Chapter 35 of Title 54.1 of *Code of Virginia*, 2013).

### **Overview of Methodology**

This study followed a phenomenological design. Rather than using large samples and measure limiting variables, I used the phenomenological approach to seek out and understand the essence of the participants' lived experiences with the phenomenon of role ambiguity (Van Manen, 2001). In order to fully grasp and describe the essential meaning of the phenomenon, I used methods such as personal observation and in-depth interviews with participants who directly had experience with the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). In this study I was the key instrument for collecting data, as this is a defining characteristic and tenant of qualitative research.

In my role as researcher I identified the suitable topic, design the study, formulated the research questions as well as the interview protocol. The qualitative design also assisted me while I maintained flexibility throughout the study making important decisions concerning my response to and use of emerging data (Creswell, 2007). Being a qualitative researcher for the phenomenological inquiry placed me as the primary means for data gathering and analysis.

I was exploring counseling supervisors' experience with role ambiguity so it was crucial that all participants had experience with the phenomenon being studied. Criterion sampling was utilized so that the counseling supervisors I identified had experiences with role ambiguity. Along with having experiences with the phenomenon, other criteria included having a current professional counseling license and graduate degrees from

CACREP accredited institutions. I also sought participants who had at least two years of experience as a counseling supervisor.

Two rounds of semi-structured interviews were utilized as the primary method of data collection. Participants were asked for an initial and then second follow-up face-to-face in-person, telephonic, or Skype interview. The interviews were taped and transcribed. Email correspondence was also printed out for analysis purposes.

My personal experiences with the phenomenon under study was also fully described and bracketed. The next step of analysis was to develop a list of significant statements found in the interview data. The significant statements were listed and grouped and then organized by emerging themes. The clustered themes or *meaning units* (Patton, 2002) then culminated by way of structural synthesis and yield the meaning and essence of the experience.

### **Summary**

While researchers have identified role ambiguity as a phenomenon experienced within the supervisory relationship, there was a minimal amount of research addressing supervisor's experiences with it in the context of the supervisory relationship. Additional research was needed to understand the essence of role ambiguity as experienced by practitioners themselves in order to inform and guide the directions of future policy and research. The following chapter will examine the previous research that describes the history of clinical supervision, the roles that are the makeup of the supervisory functions, and the effects of and reactions to role ambiguity within the supervisory relationship.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

In the concluding chapter of the *Handbook of Counselor Preparation* (published in cooperation with the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision) the authors discussed *internal obstacles* of the counselor educator (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011). These internal obstacles are a testament to the progression of the counseling profession and its subsequent educators and practitioners who are constantly evolving, creating, and adopting standards of practice. Supervisors especially find themselves in the midst of ambiguity seeking clarity of their role within the growing profession. Supervisors wear many hats, the most prominent ones being educator, counselor, and gatekeeper for the counseling profession. Because there is yet to be an unwavering universal code of ethics and global standards of practice in the counseling profession that encompass all cultures served, research continues the effort of offering hope to the conflicted and therefore less effective counseling supervisor.

This literature review is divided into five sections. The first section includes a brief history and description of clinical supervision as it relates to counselor education. Then, in the second section, I explain the aspects and roles of clinical supervision in the counseling field. The third section of this literature review provides an overview of the research that describes role ambiguity. This review includes explanations based on past research about ambiguity's causes and effects. The fourth section includes an overview of publications that have focused on discussing the prevalence of role ambiguity in the clinical field and more narrowly its utility within clinical supervision. This section also

includes an explanation of how the study of role ambiguity within the clinical supervision context is pertinent to the counseling profession. The fifth and last section includes a summary and explanation of aspects that are missing from the literature in order to situate this current study in the context of previous research while providing a rationale for this study and method.

## **Clinical Supervision in Counselor Education**

### **History and Background of Clinical Supervision**

Goodyear and Bernard (1998) referenced literature related to the practice of mental health supervision, which dates back more than 120 years. In the late 1800s, supervision was an aspect of social work exemplified by the Charity Organization Society (COS) that sustained positions for staff members who supervised apprentice workers (Munson, 2002). The COS existed as its own entity from 1883 to 1893 when the Central Relief Association, later known as the Bureau of Organized Charities, absorbed it.

A few years later in 1902, Sigmund Freud emerged from his self-proclaimed era of self-analysis. Upon coming out of his *glorious heroic age* and *splendid isolation* (Freud, 1914) a number of young doctors loitered around him with the explicit intention of learning, practicing, and spreading the knowledge of psychoanalysis. The collaborative was made up by analysts such as Alfred Adler, Sandor Ferenczi, Carl Jung, and Ernest Jones who along with Freud came to be known as the founding members of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. It was at this point that supervision transitioned from an informal apprenticeship to a training structure.



Psychoanalysis is famous for being a pioneering approach that set the precedent for addressing supervision from its inception (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998). According to Buckley et al. (1982) supervision was an integral part of the duties assumed by the members of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society that complemented the theoretical teachings and noted analysis of the members themselves. Addressing and incorporating these three elements (supervision, teaching, and personal analysis) in the training process was then adopted as a formal requirement of the International Training Commission in 1925 (Kugler, 1995).

From the 1920s' psychoanalytic conception of clinical supervision to the mid-1960s, supervisory theory evolved. Leddick and Bernard (1980) identified the adoption of facilitative theory, behavioral theory, and skills training as phases in the development of clinical supervision. In 1961 the literature on clinical supervision had expanded its forum as well as audience with the start of a major journal whose content was and continues to be exclusive to education, counseling, and supervision. The *Counselor Education and Supervision Journal* (CES) began as the defining periodical of the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES). The CES journal's mission was to disseminate information, training, and supervisory guidance to counselors and was sponsored by the American Personnel and Guidance Association (APGA), which evolved into the present-day American Counseling Association (ACA). The CES geared itself toward educators and academics who prepare and supervise counselors (Edwards, 1999).

Beginning with its first issue in 1961, The *Counselor Education and Supervision* journal has been a printed testament of counselor education's growth as a theoretical and

professional endeavor (Sexton, 1998). Along with the increased attention to research, counseling supervision has continued to be identified and developed as a separate specialty within the counseling profession (Dye & Borders, 1990).

With collaboration and credentials of the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision and American Counseling Association, a cooperative accreditation effort came to fruition in 1981 with the establishment of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). Research on goals, functions, and methods in clinical supervision has helped the delivery of clinical supervision stand out as one of the central standards of CACREP. From CACREP's inception, writers have made unyielding calls for systematic training in clinical supervision for supervisors. Writers such as Cormier and Bernard (1982), Newman (1981), and Upchurch (1985) have spoken to the necessity of supervisor training claiming that the past assumption that good counselors automatically made good supervisors was unethical. They took the position that untrained supervisors were practicing outside of their area of competence (Borders, Bernard, Dye, Fong, Henderson, & Nance, 1991).

Though clinical supervision has roots stemming from roughly more than a century ago, supervision remains relatively new as a specific domain of inquiry. It continues to develop its solid conceptual and empirical foundation. Just recently a definition of supervision, penned by Goodyear and Bernard (2004), has come to be accepted within the counseling profession that delineates the three broad roles of clinical supervisors:

Supervision is an intervention that is provided by a more senior member of a profession to a more junior member or members of that same profession. This relationship is evaluative, extends over time, and has the simultaneous purposes of enhancing the professional functioning of the more junior person(s), monitoring the quality of professional services offered to the clients she, he, or they see(s), and serving as a gatekeeper of those who are to enter the particular profession (p. 8).

Supervisors adopt the responsibilities for development of the supervisees, the treatment of the supervisees' clients, and protection of the public from incompetent practitioners (Bernard & Goodyear 2004; Bradley & Ladany 2001; Falvey, 2002). The definition of supervision specifically delineates the multiple roles that clinical supervisors assume. These might be termed teacher, evaluator, counselor, model, mentor, and advisor.

### **Distinctions between Clinical Supervision and Administrative Supervision**

The ACA *Code of Ethics* (2005) delineates the importance of relationship boundaries with supervisees. Counseling supervisors are tasked with *clearly* defining and maintaining ethical, professional and social relationships with their current supervisees. Minimizing potential conflicts and explaining to supervisees the expectations and responsibilities the supervisor associates with does this. The literature frequently describes what supervisors *do* through the use of role-labels (Morgan & Sprenkle, 2007) such as clinical and administrative supervisor.

According to Lambie and Sias (2009), it is important to differentiate between administrative and clinical supervision. Research has shown that administrative supervision is often provided by personnel who are not trained in counselor education or supervision (American School Counselor Association, 2005). Clinical supervision is different, as experienced professional counselors trained in counselor supervision and practice often provide it. Administrative supervision involves what Lambie and Sias (2009) call *organizational duties*. These duties can include coordinating assessments, academic advising, maintaining records, and coordinating counseling programs, whereas

clinical supervision is designed to promote supervisees' knowledge, clinical skills, and personal and professional development (Studer, 2005).

The literature regarding supervision in the counseling field makes important assertions about the differences between clinical and administrative supervision. Sometimes a supervisor is both a clinical and administrative supervisor for a counselor. There are also situations that exist in which a supervisor is clearly a clinical supervisor or an administrative supervisor. Administrative supervision emphasizes abundance with administrative and procedural aspects of an agency or a school's work while clinical supervision emphasizes improving counseling skills and effectiveness of the supervisee (Bryan, 2009). The supervisors in this study were clinical supervisors of counselors only; not administrative supervisors.

### **Roles of Clinical Supervisors in the Counseling Field**

#### **Counseling Supervisors**

Supervision is a vital aspect of counselor development. Because the clinical supervisor takes on the roles of teacher, counselor, consultant, mentor, and evaluator, supervision affects the supervisee, the clients they work with, as well as supervisors themselves and the counseling profession. Biaggio, Paget, and Chenoweth (1997) collectively stated that these overlapping roles are inherent in supervision. Furthermore, ACES standards dictate that counseling supervisors are expected to possess the personal and professional maturity to assume these multiple roles (1995).

These combined roles of clinical counseling supervisors serve three main purposes: facilitation of counselor professional and personal development [counseling], promotion of counselor competencies [educating], and promotion of accountable

counseling services and programs [gatekeeping] (Edwards, 2013). The literature is forthcoming about the importance of supervision in counselor development. Counseling supervision is a conglomerate of educational, counseling, and professional tenets; and counseling supervisors are guided by a complex structure of rules, regulations, standards, and guidelines (Fall & Sutton, 2004).

### **Teacher**

Each supervisor makes choices about how to manage his or her learning relationship with supervisees. Rooted in the helping professions, supervision traditionally has been conceptualized using counseling frameworks. Supervision however, as it has developed into a profession, has broadened out from exclusively a counseling perspective to incorporating an educational orientation as well (Lizzio & Wilson, 2002).

According to Dye and Borders (1990), in order for supervisors to be proficient it is not enough for them to be just competent counselors. Supervisors need to also be able to teach their counseling knowledge and skills in ways that promote supervisees' learning and their abilities to exhibit effectiveness and a professional identity. Supervisors instruct supervisees about ethical and legal matters and also teach supervisees about the many complex and interrelated issues that are inherent when counseling persons who are different from themselves (Westerfield, 2008).

The educative aspect of the supervisor role provides a medium to upgrade and refine supervisees' intervention and conceptualization skills (Corey, 2001). According to the *ACES Code of Ethics* (<http://www.acesonline.net>), supervisors should facilitate their supervisory sessions in such a way as to provide opportunities for supervisees to apply the knowledge they are learning and understand the rationale for the skills they are

encouraged to utilize. Along with intervention and conceptualization skills it is also important to attend to the growth and development of the supervisees' personalization and professional skills. It is for these latter two skills Bernard and Goodyear (2004) provided a caveat to the educative aspect to supervision: "The supervisor's process is not to adopt a teaching role and instruct the supervisee about what might have been done" (p. 220). Instead, questions that are designed to increase the supervisee's insight into his or her own blind spots are used, thus increasing competency, (Edwards, 2013).

### **Counselor**

According to *ACES Best Practices* (2011) the supervisor possesses a strong professional identity as a counselor and supervisor, and is knowledgeable about required and recommended experiences that promote self-efficacy, development, and competence in supervisees. It is a supervisor's counseling tendencies that are effective with assisting supervisee's personalization and professional skill development. As with professional counseling, the supervisor knows that *the relationship* in supervision is a root force in terms of the effectiveness of supervision (White & Queener, 2003).

The responsibility for the quality of the supervisory relationship is partial toward the supervisor (Fall & Sutton, 2004). Taking on the counselor identity is apt for creating and maintaining a supervisory alliance. Supervisor empathy invites supervisee self-disclosure, and supervisor counseling credentials and practice helps with assisting supervisees emotionally process their responses to clients (O'Donovan, Halford, & Walters, 2011).

Explorative dialogue and emotional processing often develop a map for finding supervisee assets and liabilities, supervisees' barriers to effective empathy with clients,

and awareness of supervisees' own cultural background and how it may influence the counseling relationship with clients. The counseling nature of the supervisor's role provides the supervisor an inherent ability to forge an environment of trust, openness, and productivity between supervisee and supervisor (Lemberger & Dollarhide, 2006).

Supervisors and supervisees should not establish a psychotherapeutic relationship, however. The supervisory relationship is an intimate one and although supervision is seen as a separate process from counseling, the supervisory process can be cathartic and growth producing (Corey, 2003). According to the ACES Ethical Guidelines, "Personal issues should be addressed in supervision only in terms of the impact of these issues on clients and professional functioning." (<http://www.acesonline.net>). During its course, the supervisory relationship reveals the supervisee's counseling competencies as they are demonstrated in the field. The supervisor is obligated to evaluate the supervisee's competencies and provide ongoing feedback regarding his or her functioning, geared toward meeting professional, legal, and ethical, and educational standards.

### **Evaluator**

Evaluation is ever present in all stages of supervisee development and is considered to be a foundational aspect of clinical supervision. The evaluator role embodies monitoring supervisee development and a gatekeeping service for the profession (Fall & Sutton, 2004). Along with encouraging supervisees compliance with legal, ethical, and professional standards of clinical practice, supervisors are also asked to evaluate and certify supervisee performance and potential for academic, screening, selection, placement, employment, and credentialing purposes. Furthermore, supervisors ought to ensure that the programs conducted and experiences provided follow current

guidelines and standards of ACA and its divisions (ACES *Ethical Guidelines*, 3.01, 1993).

Cheon (2009) highlighted the importance of evaluation within the supervisory bond. He stated that the evaluative part of the supervisory process is what differentiates supervision relationships from therapist and client relationships. In the same vein, Milne (2009) provided a description of the key functions of supervision and stressed that the incorporation of obligatory and evaluative components are what set it apart from related activities such as mentoring and therapy.

Supervisors are to point out strengths and competencies. They are to also *assertively and clearly* communicate their critiques as to what is effective, not effective, and potentially harmful regarding the supervisee's interaction with clients. According to McAuliffe and Eriksen (2011), supervisors make suggestions about alternative interventions and offer comments on what the supervisor perceives to be most or least helpful to supervisees and their clients. However, according to Burke et al. (1998), just the mere prospect of evaluation can lead to a weakening in the supervisory relationship.

In 2006, Westfield explained that the shock value of *evaluation*, alluded to by Burke et al. (1998), was because most supervisors have been trained by counseling psychologists and educators who are often humanists, who historically have had a difficult time providing direct negative feedback. Westfield bluntly proclaimed: "Critiquing people effectively is a real challenge" (2006). Fall and Sutton (2004) found that supervisors often exhibited reluctance, lack of skill, and anxiety when conducting evaluations.



Research has continued to be published regarding best practices and suggested modalities to deal with supervisors' reluctance, lack of skill, and anxiety when attending to their evaluator role. Bogo et. al. (2007) recommended using standardized evaluation tools such as the Supervisee Performance Assessment Instrument (SPAI). These authors also advocated for and encouraged the use of clear guidelines for dealing with supervisees who are *underperforming*. These are typically supervisor handbooks, ethical codes, policies, and procedures. They also recommend that counseling supervisors be trained in providing corrective feedback.

### **Role Ambiguity**

#### **Causes**

The roles of educator, evaluator, and counselor which counseling supervisors take on are as common as they are inevitable. Cheon, Blumer, Shih, Murphy, and Sato (2009) have stated that supervisors are mandated to perform these multiple roles as a necessary function of *professional socialization*. The requirements of these roles overlap and, in some cases, they also conflict. These overlapping but not fully integrated roles, within the supervisory position, are commonplace yet implicit causal factors for experiencing role ambiguity.

Perceived ambiguity arises from a perfect storm of complex, novel, and insoluble responsibilities. The ACA *Code of Ethics* directs supervisors to evaluate supervisees' developing counseling approaches and their work with clients. Protecting clients and the public is an important responsibility of supervisors. Supervisors must also effectively assist supervisees in meeting standards of practice through guidance and education. Finally, supervisors are to act as gatekeepers when they deem supervisees do not meet

standards for entry into the counseling profession (Nelson, Oliver, Reeve, & McNichols, 2010). Counseling supervisors enter into the supervisory relationship juggling these roles and are ethically obligated to work towards balance.

According to Kahn et al. (1964), “Role ambiguity occurs when a role performer lacks information required to do their job; receives contradictory messages from different role senders or receives conflicting information from the different subsystems in the organization” (p. 61). Classes specific to training and educating counseling supervision practitioners are relatively new and have brought on a flood of developing theories, methods, competencies, and subjective advices. Furthermore, the multiple roles of educator, evaluator, and counselor have come from their own fields of origination bringing with them inherited motivations and standardized practices.

Supervision is a complex situation in which there are a great number of cues for the supervisor to take into account (Adobor, 2006). Experiencing role ambiguity is a byproduct of the occurrence when supervisors struggle with finding the appropriate balance of their supportive and evaluative roles. Nelson et al. (2010) admitted that executing the appropriate balance between “structure and process, cognition and emotion, and directive and nondirective interventions for the unique needs of each supervisee can be difficult” (p. 7).

### **Responses to Role Ambiguity**

The literature regarding role ambiguity has revealed substantial findings regarding the effects of role ambiguity. Prominent distinctions describing perceptions of role ambiguity are found in existing research. The descriptions are qualified with either/or

language for example: either positive or negative, either good or bad, either constructive or destructive, either harmful or healthy, and either threatening or desirable.

McLain (2009) called ambiguity *a barrier to understanding*. If an ambiguous situation requires action on the part of perceivers, they can feel *threatened* and *stressed*. Supervisors have also claimed to have experienced other effects stemming from role ambiguity such as *worry*, *obsessions/compulsions*, and *panic* sensations (Dugas, Gosselin, & Ladouceur, 2001). Early in the history of ambiguity research, stress and avoidance were common reactions to ambiguity. When supervisors became conflicted with role ambiguity it was seen in part to create *discomfort*, *anxiety*, and *dissonance* (Korinek & Kimball, 2003).

It has been noted that a fair amount of supervisors responded with aversion when experiencing role ambiguity, however a growing number of supervisors have been interviewed and are disclosing that they are attracted to what McLain (2009) called, *the mystery* or *cognitive challenge of incomplete information*. Szajnberg (2011) advocated for tolerance of ambiguity as it has been shown that if ambiguity can be tolerated rather than avoided, the experience can facilitate increased *structuralization* and *emotional robustness* (p. 1). Schlesinger (2003) published an appeal for having positive regard for ambiguity by selling it as a one-way ticket to a *greater sense of inner clarity*. He also indicated an added bonus for the tolerant practitioner: the knack for “grasping and integrating how negative emotions imbricate positive emotions” (p. 7).

By way of practice and research, ambiguity has been discovered to be an indigenous aspect of counseling supervision. Clegg (2010) acknowledged the vitality of ambiguity and found that practitioners meet the *reality of uncertainty* at different levels

and in stages, just as the literature describes the process of individuals who are exposed to death and subsequently traverse the acceptance process (denial, anger, bargaining, sadness, exploration, acknowledgement). The ACES' *Best Practices*, published in 2011, encourages supervisors to be open to ambiguity; and challenges them to take appropriate risks and extend the borders of their comfort zone. Once out of the comfort zone supervisors are exposed to tribulations. According to Cheon, Blumer, Shih, Murphy, and Sato (2009), supervisors negotiate and deal with conflict in different ways.

### **Effects on Supervisor Actions**

Conflict is both unavoidable and desirable according to Bernard and Goodyear (2004). A supervisor's preference for certainty and the level of affinity toward tolerating ambiguity, has been shown to correlate with subsequent actions. Authors DeRoma, Martin, and Kessler (2003) echoed past researchers' findings related to role ambiguity's negative effects on supervisor behavior. Potthas (1999) and Furnham (1994) were said to have found that in learning contexts, there was a likelihood for arriving at one solution (verses consideration of many), rigid dichotomization, and desire for premature closure when the supervisor doesn't tolerate ambiguity well.

DeRoma, Martin, and Kessler (2003) also used the works of Wittenberg and Norcross (2001) as evidence for associating perfectionism and low levels of enjoyment in psychotherapy when mental health practitioners had low tolerance for ambiguity. Furthermore, Yurtserver (2001) noted that ambiguity intolerant individuals were more likely to distort information and that low endorsement for diversity interventions is also an action stemming from ambiguity having a negative effect on the practitioner.

Uncertainty, especially when it is met with apprehension, has been shown to have the potential for eliciting behaviors such as seeking guidance, deflecting criticism, owning limits, and proving competence (Spafford, Schryer, Campbell, & Lingard, 2007). Todd and Storm (1997) as well as Kaiser (1997), endorsed findings that revealed that supervisors were tempted to emphasize supervision contracts and techniques and to depend on making rules to regulate behavior rather than deal with the discomforts of experiencing role ambiguity in the context of the supervisory relationship. In recent years even counseling supervision aficionado Janine Bernard (2005) shared that she had once been so sensitive about ethics, rules, and the possibility of the multiple relationships within the supervision milieu that she placed *too much distance* between herself and her supervisees.

The effects of ambiguity on supervisor behaviors are not all bleak. Supervisor behavior can also be positive when it's being affected by role ambiguity. Cheon, Blumer, Shih, Murphy, and Sato (2009) validated toleration of ambiguity as a function of learning in which supervisor actions tend more to be facilitative, resilient, and strength based. Todd (2002) found that supervisor actions related to role ambiguity's effects, are ones that promote dialogue about philosophy, preferred ideas, methods, and interventions to help prevent problems and manage conflicts that may arise.

The extent to which supervisors tolerate ambiguity has been seen as a factor that influences supervisor actions. Spafford et al. (2007) shared that supervisors who accepted that there would be ambiguity consciously tried to create an environment in which students could safely explore and manage their own uncertainty. Role ambiguity and the

tolerance thereof have been seen to have an effect on supervisor actions in ways that influence the supervisory relationship.

### **Effects on Supervisory Relationship**

Supervision, according to Goodyear and Guzzardo (2000), represents a vehicle for teaching and reinforcement of ethical and practice standards, enhancement of supervisee skills and knowledge, and for reaching the overarching goal of ensuring the welfare of counseling consumers. Therefore, supervisory relationship is the fuel that powers that vehicle. In the *Journal of Business Ethics* (2006), Adobor published his view of how positive and negative forces within the relationship affected the performance of supervision, which trickles into affecting the client, supervisee, and supervisory goals.

Major suppliers of negative and positive forces are the inherent conflicts that come with creating a proficient supervisory relationship. Nelson and Friedlander (2001) stated that when conflicts are well managed and successfully resolved, a satisfactory supervisory experience and the supervisee's growth as a counselor are more likely. Cheon, Lumber, Shih, Murphy, and Sato (2008) have warned however, that unresolved conflict and conflict that is not resolved in a satisfactory manner, could be damaging and destructive to the supervisory relationship and clients as well. Parallel to the supervisee-client relationship the supervisor-supervisee relationship is formed in a way that in order for the supervisees to feel free to talk about their work as a counselor, they need a safe and respectful atmosphere (Nelson, Oliver, Reeve, & McNichols, 2010). If a supervisor does not tolerate role ambiguity well their attempts to *keep the peace* may be jeopardized.

### **Clinical Supervision, Role Ambiguity, and the Counseling Profession**

The roles of counselor, educator, and supervisor were professionally linked in 1981 with the collaboration between ACES and ACA to establish CACREP. ACES, one of the founding associations of ACA, emphasized the need for quality education and supervision of counselors for all work settings. The counseling profession and the preparation of its practitioners became the mission of CACREP. The preparation has been attended to through classroom instruction, fieldwork, and clinical supervision. According to the *Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Education, and Development* (2005), the needs of supervisees are a blending of instruction with exploration of thoughts and feelings about the counseling field, the client(s), the supervisory relationship, parallel processes, and the clinical material itself. Teaching, supporting, and evaluation are viewed as skills intrinsic to supervision (Falendar & Cornish, 2004) and are ethically mandated for the protection, growth, and development of the client, profession, and practitioner.

### **Ethical Considerations**

ACA, ACES, and CACREP share the common purpose of advancing counselor education and supervision in order to improve the provision of counseling services in diverse settings in an ethical manner. Just as a film director employs a cast to fulfill their vision, supervisors within the counseling profession invite multiple roles to achieve their purpose. A conglomerate of counseling, educative, and evaluative roles in particular makes up the work of counseling supervisors. Literature has revealed however that this blending of roles often makes for experiencing the phenomenon of role ambiguity which has been shown to have the potential to inadvertently affect in a negative manner the ethical treatment of clients (Tromski-Klingshirn & Davis, 2007).

Counseling supervisors may become distracted with the effects of role ambiguity and their attempts to resolve it which may take away from giving appropriate attention to the supervisee's clinical activities (case reviews, processing counselor-client dynamics, and development of clinical skills) and may increase the risk of supervisees providing poor or unethical services to clients (Tromski-Klingshirn & Davis, 2007). Furthermore, it is ethically required to maintain role clarity and explain to supervisees the expectations and responsibilities associated with each role (*ACA Code of Ethics*, 2005). In other words, counseling supervisors serve as role models for professional and ethical behavior.

### **Role Modeling**

It is noted in *ACES Best Practices* (2011), "The supervisor practices and promotes professional boundaries in supervision, thereby acting as a role model to the supervisee" and, "The supervisor demonstrates professionalism in an effort to encourage the supervisee to exhibit similar behavior." Research has shown that a supervisor's competencies and ability to deal with role ambiguity can greatly affect performance (Adobor, 2011). Ambiguity, despite its not being a new concept in the counseling field, is minimally honored in the literature. Witnesses to counseling supervisors experiencing role ambiguity were traditionally labeled as being resistant; needing remediation and deterred role modeling. Recent literature however has encouraged the recognition of role ambiguity and has promoted its legitimacy as a part of the learning process (Moberg, 2005).

### **Summary and Context of Study**

This chapter presented a subset of the published research regarding the relationship between ambiguity and clinical supervision. Counseling supervisors have



highlighted their dealings with role ambiguity. The abundance of irresolute research inspired this study with the aim of contributing a narrative scaffold for counseling supervisors who find themselves *journeying in ambiguity*. The purpose of this phenomenological inquiry was to explore the attitudes, meanings, and perceptions that counseling supervisors have about their experiences with role ambiguity.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

A review of the literature pertaining to counseling supervision revealed that being a clinical supervisor requires counselors to assume several roles within the counseling profession. According to the American Counseling Association's 1990 Standards for Counseling Supervisors, "The supervisor's primary functions are to teach the inexperienced and to foster their professional development, to serve as consultants to experienced counselors, and to assist at all levels in the provision of effective counseling services." These roles of counselor supervisors are generalized as educator, professional counselor, and administrative supervisor. Independently each role has its own rules, regulations, standards, guidelines, and intentionality.

Supervisory relationships are a complex blend of professional, educational, and therapeutic relationships. This complex process can become increasingly complicated when supervisors are involved in multiple roles with trainees. Combining the roles of supervising, counseling, and educating often presents conflicts (Corey & Herlihy, 1996c; Pope & Vasquez, 1998; Whiston & Emerson, 1989). One such conflict experienced by supervisors has been termed *role ambiguity*.

Researchers have put forth scales assessing for tolerance of ambiguity, reports on the effects and cautions from ambiguity, and suggestions about how to address this ambiguity. However, a gap existed in describing the essence of role ambiguity as experienced by counseling supervisors. The focus of this phenomenological inquiry was based on my assumption that the experience of role ambiguity is common among

counseling supervisors, and through rigorous methods of in-depth interviewing, I was able to give voice to counselor supervisors' perspectives.

This chapter introduces the methodology that I used to explore the experiences and perceptions counseling supervisors have with role ambiguity. I have included a rationale for a qualitative approach using phenomenological inquiry, a listing of research questions to be explored, a description of my role as researcher, and my planned data collection and analysis procedures. The results of this study may lead to a fuller understanding of the role ambiguity that counseling supervisors experience which could ultimately lead to ways to accept and utilize this ambiguity and increase the effectiveness of the supervision of counselors.

### **Rationale for Using Qualitative-Phenomenological Methodology**

Most studies about role ambiguity have utilized a quantitative methodology, which has yielded data by way of pre-test and post-test formats and assessments (Brunetto, Farr-Wharton, & Shacklock, 2011; Campbell, & Lingard, 2007; Culbreth, Scarborough, Banks-Johnson, & Solomon, 2005; Itzhaky, 2001; Spafford, Schryer, & Kemery, 2006). The quantitative results from these studies concluded with only peripheral descriptions of role ambiguity. Specific to the field of supervision, even when using qualitative methods, the results were derived from the receiver of supervision and not from the supervisors themselves.

To date, there have been no known qualitative research studies that focus on the counseling supervisors' experiences with role ambiguity. In order to investigate the phenomenon of role ambiguity I utilized a qualitative phenomenological methodology.

In the following sections, I describe the tenets of phenomenology and qualitative research methods that shaped the design of this study.

### **Characteristics of Qualitative Research**

This study was designed to explore the issue of role ambiguity within the counselor supervision context. The overarching goal of a qualitative researcher is to create a *thick and detailed* description of the perspectives of those who are experiencing the phenomenon of interest that is being explored (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). The qualitative researcher “builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (Creswell, 1998, p. 15). Therefore, I planned and used qualitative methods to obtain a detailed understanding of counseling supervisors’ perspectives with role ambiguity.

My approach was non-manipulative in nature so that I could study the real-world phenomenon of how participants experience role ambiguity. I used a qualitative research design because it is adaptive and unconstrained which avoids rigidity and aids with discovering deeper understandings of the phenomenon being studied. Using an empathic stance when interviewing my participants, I was able to gain an understanding of role ambiguity while extending an openness, sensitivity, and responsiveness with my participants (Patton, 2002).

Qualitative methods are aimed at yielding useful insights about the phenomenon, not empirical generalizations from a sample to a population (Patton, 2002). I utilized purposeful sampling to ensure the findings were *information rich* and *illuminative*. I obtained *thick descriptions* from the participant’s detailed perspectives and experiences. According to Patton (2022), to gain full understanding of a phenomenon, it is critical to

combine personal experiences and insights with others who share closeness with the phenomenon. While having complete objectivity was not a goal in qualitative inquiries, it was important for me to reflect on my own perspective regarding the phenomenon to ensure participant's voices were clearly heard (Patton, 2002).

Qualitative research was an especially appropriate methodology for this study because I was exploring a topic about which little is known, and a phenomenon of emotional depth and sensitivity (Padgett, 1998). I wanted to know what counseling supervisors think about role ambiguity, what they do about it, and what their lived experiences are. According to Geertz (1986), "Whatever sense we have of how things stand with someone else's inner life is gained through their expressions and not through some magical intrusion into their consciousness" (p. 373). I used phenomenological inquiry to elicit my participants' interpretations and perceptions of role ambiguity within the context of counseling supervision.

### **Phenomenology Rationale**

The roots of phenomenology are traced as far back as the late 1800s. Based upon the work of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and subsequent members of the phenomenological movement, the focus of a researcher's inquiry was to describe what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). These philosophical writings and lenses are taken, developed, and used by social and health science projects especially in sociology, psychology, nursing, and education (Creswell, 2007). The phenomenological tradition that started as a philosophy has since evolved into an inquiry paradigm (Lincoln, 1990), an interpretive theory (Denzon & Lincoln 2000), a social science orientation (Harper, 2000), a major qualitative tradition (Creswell, 2007),

and a research methods framework (Moustakas, 1994). These varying forms share the common focus of exploring how human beings make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness, both individually and collectively (Patton, 2002).

Phenomenologists focus on what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon. The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence. In this study I identified role ambiguity as an *object* of counseling supervisors' experience.

In order to add to the construction of a particular phenomenon, the qualitative researcher selects an area of study and utilizes in-depth interviews with people who have directly experienced the phenomenon of interest. Then through analyzing the interviews and other qualitative observations, the researcher looks for themes. The themes guide the researcher to develop textural (what the participants experience) and structural (how they experience it terms of the conditions, situations, or context) and combine those to convey an overall *essence* of the experience (Creswell, 2007). This realized essence may subsequently provide a guide for decision-making and action (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This study aims to add to the current body of knowledge relating to exploring the experiences and perceptions of role ambiguity from a counseling supervisor's perspective.

### **Research Problem**

Phenomenological research begins with the researcher identifying and selecting a researchable problem. Researchers commonly name role ambiguity as a problem faced and experienced by supervisors. According to Sherry (1991), one of the main reasons supervisors are ethically vulnerable is that conflicting roles between supervisors and

supervisees are inherent in the relationship. Even though supervisors are expected to play multiple roles, and at times these roles overlap, it is just as often that they may also conflict (Corey, 2003). Sherry highlights a risk of harm to both client and the supervisee from a supervisor's "blurred objectivity, impaired judgment, or exploitation" (Corey, 2003, p. 263). Counselors and counselor educators are often expected to function as clinical supervisors. To carry out the role ethically and effectively, supervisors must have proper continuing education and training especially for identifying what dilemmas are frequently encountered in the field as well as how to ethically resolve them.

According to Vasquez (1992), supervisors must be well trained, knowledgeable, and skilled in the practice of clinical supervision. Development of practices, or policies, is crucial for the continued development of the counseling supervision field. The purpose of this study was to explore counseling supervisors' experiences and perceptions of role ambiguity.

As noted above, one of the procedures for conducting phenomenological research is recognizing and specifying the broad philosophical assumptions of phenomenology. Data was collected from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon by way of in-depth interviews with participants. Other forms of data was collected such as researcher observations and supervision evaluations (Creswell, 2007).

After data was collected I rifled through the data (interview transcriptions) and coded the text according to sentence groupings, quotes, and other *significant statements* that provided a common understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) recommended taking the significant statements and writing a description of the context or setting that influenced how the participants

experienced the phenomenon, structural description, and what the participants experienced, textural description. Moustakas invited researchers to also write about their own experiences. I included the textural and structural descriptions participants provided as well as a composite description that presented the essentials of the phenomenon, called the *essence*.

### **Research Questions**

This study was guided by and explored two broad research questions: “What are counseling supervisor’s experiences with role ambiguity?” and “How do counseling supervisors experience role ambiguity?” In addition, the study explored the following subquestions:

*Subquestion 1:* What are your thoughts about Bernard’s notion that counseling supervisors sometimes take on the roles of counselor, educator, and evaluator?

*Subquestion 2:* Do you believe that these roles are clear or ambiguous and how do they relate to you being a counseling supervisor?

*Subquestion 3:* What are your feelings about the appropriateness of these roles being the makeup for the counseling supervisor role?

*Subquestion 4:* What place do these roles have within the counseling supervisory relationship?

*Subquestion 5:* What are your experiences and perceptions concerning which strategies or methods are most useful when resolving role ambiguity?

### **Role of the Researcher**

My role was to identify a suitable topic, design the study, and formulate research questions and an interview protocol. I also built in safeguards to minimize personal



biases, selective perception, and theoretical predispositions (Patton, 2007) in order to preserve the integrity of the research data that I collected. I clearly stated my biases, values, and assumptions at the outset of this study and continued to do so throughout the research process.

### **Assumptions and Biases**

As a qualitative researcher, I recognized that my assumptions could influence my understanding of participants' experiences. I utilized several procedures in order to bracket these assumptions so they did not unduly influence either the data accumulation or the data analysis process. First, I immersed myself with the prior explanations of role ambiguity found in the literature. Second, after becoming aware of my prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions regarding the phenomenon, I bracketed my presuppositions so they did not intrude on and contaminate my interviews with participants and interview my participants. Third, I used a reflexive journal to record thoughts and feelings throughout the data collection and analysis process, specifically checking for ways in which my assumptions and biases might have entered into and affected data analysis and results. I followed an interview protocol so I would not lead the participants in providing preconceived answers. Lastly, I used member checks with participants after each round of interviews to ensure my results accurately reflected what they intended to express during the interviews (Hays & Singh, 2012).

My previous experience includes providing counseling supervision to practicum and internship students while enrolled as a doctoral student at Old Dominion University. As part of the program requirements, I provided individual, triadic, and group supervision to graduate students in the counseling program. I have also worked as a psychotherapist

in Norfolk, Virginia for 5 years as a licensed professional counselor. I have personally experienced role ambiguity, and have heard accounts from other superiors about the difficulties and dilemmas faced by supervisors as a result of role ambiguity.

I believed that counselor supervisors' accounts, stories, and opinions have not been adequately captured by the current literature, thus the main motivation for conducting this study. I believed I was able to suspend preconceived assumptions since I did not believe I had the full picture of the experiences of the clinical supervisors who experienced role ambiguity. I have not worked closely with other counseling supervisors in the doctoral program, and I did not have personal knowledge of the experiences or perceptions of other counseling supervisors in the area of role ambiguity. This lack of in-depth knowledge created a natural curiosity with which I approached this study and allowed me to engage in this research project without strong preconceived ideas about the phenomenon I studied.

The primary assumption I had was that counseling supervision is crucial for ensuring client welfare and sustainability of professional counseling. I also assumed that as counseling supervisors become more experienced, they also become more effective. Another assumption I had was that counseling supervisors are made to be aware of their counseling roots and that differentiating counseling supervision as a distinct division within the counseling field is a fresh concept.

I assumed that counseling supervisors experience role ambiguity due to operating contiguously under the auspices of teacher, evaluator, counselor, model, mentor, and adviser. I also assumed that supervisors assume the responsibility of ensuring compliance with relevant legal, ethical, and professional standards for clinical practice (Corey, 2003).

In addition, I held the assumption that it is the responsibility of the supervisor to handle role-related conflicts in an appropriate and ethical manner.

### **Researcher Subjectivity**

Acknowledging and embracing researcher subjectivity is a recent trend in qualitative research. Advocates of qualitative research assert that attempting to minimize subjectivity aligns qualitative approaches too closely with quantitative paradigms of *objective science* (Hays & Singh, 2012). Subjectivity, in qualitative research, becomes a way to understand the phenomenon more intimately rather than keeping distance from the topic (Patton, 2002; Schneider, 1999).

### **Strategies for Maintaining Subjectivity**

Peshkin (1998) stated that *virtuous subjectivity* should be embraced as it is a vital factor of qualitative research. He wrote of the importance of both individual and multiple subjectivities, including the researchers themselves, for its tension inducing qualities. This tension between the researcher values and the values supported by the subject matter leads to and enhances the *nuanced* account of the subject matter (Hays & Singh 2012). Trustworthiness, according to Hays and Singh (2012), is built by the researcher being a naïve inquirer and proactively engaging in participant checks.

Along with approaching my study with curiosity and utilizing member checks, I came to a consensus on the interpretation of findings in relation to my own potential biases or assumptions. I used reflexive journaling to explore and identify personal and professional issues that may have indicated a lack of neutrality in my data analysis. My own cultural complexities and those of my participants was also explored and taken into

account as they might have overtly and also covertly influence data collection and analysis.

### **Researcher Objectivity**

Rather than use the terms *subjectivity* and *objectivity* as ammunition fueling the battle between qualitative and quantitative researchers, I joined with Patton (2002) in using the phrase *empathic neutrality* to describe my attending to the valued objectivity of research. Conducting objective tests, gathering data through instruments developed by human beings, asking participants to complete prefabricated questionnaires are all infiltrated by researcher bias. Even though it is a recently agreed notion that no research is completely objective, no credible research strategy advocates biased distortion of data to serve the researcher's *interests and prejudices*. This study was designed and conducted with efforts and strategies for maintaining trustworthiness, authenticity, and neutrality.

### **Strategies for Maintaining Objectivity/Neutrality**

In efforts to maintain empathic neutrality, I did not conceal biases that were the basis for expectations I had for my study. I expected to find that evaluation and provision of critical feedback was a sensitive aspect of supervision that is commonly avoided by counseling supervisors. I also had a bias regarding the ACA Ethical Codes alluding to supervisors having an initial role identity of counselor and believing this to be a causal element to counseling supervisors experiencing role ambiguity. Section F of the ACA Code of Ethics (2005) is introduced with the statement, "Counselors aspire to foster meaningful and respectful professional relationships and to maintain appropriate boundaries with supervisees and students" (p. 13). It is also stated that counseling supervisors are obligated to monitor the services provided by *other* counselors or

counselors-in-training. The code states that, “Prior to offering clinical supervision services, *counselors* are trained in supervision methods and techniques.” I expected my participants to identify themselves primarily as educators or counselors who take on the supervisor role rather than assuming a supervisor role first and then incorporating counseling and educational approaches.

Another bias that I had was that I believed that the argument for and against ambiguity is perpetual and is a saturated debate, and I expected that my data would reveal positive and negative attitudes towards ambiguity equally. Because my participants were based and practice in the United States of America, I expected explanations and descriptions to be congruent with Western ideals and attitudes. I also expected that my participants would demonstrate some level of resistance and defensiveness when I broach the area regarding ethics because they may have sensed that I was questioning whether they are ethical practitioners. It was important for me to have been constantly being aware of my assumptions and expectations during the course of the study and I proactively ensured objectivity and neutrality.

Several means to maintain objectivity and neutrality was used during the data collection and analysis process. I have identified my personal biases in this document and continued to monitor the influences of these biases by keeping a reflexive journal. Following Watt’s (2007) example, my journal started in advance of the study and reflected my motivations and interests in my line of inquiry (Hays & Singh, 2012). I wrote questions asking how my experiences with role ambiguity might shape my expectations of participants and of the data, and how I would manage hearing information

that contradicted my experiences. Furthermore, I my reflexive journal included my reactive thoughts to the challenging aspects of qualitative research.

Additionally, multiple forms of data was collected and triangulated. I utilized a demographic form, transcripts from the initial and follow-up interviews, emails confirming results, and other informational documents. These multiple forms of data allowed me to compare and contrast themes across several mediums and sources.

In this study I was not the sole reviewer of the data however. Michael White and David Epston (1990) made the case that only a fraction of experience can be *storied* and *expressed* at any one time, and that a great deal of lived experience *inevitably falls outside* the dominate story being told (p.15). I utilized both a system of member checking and recruited a peer debriefer to assist me with synthesizing the material to ensure the findings were correct and not limited or affected by my biases. The multiple perspectives in my research analysis advocate for my stance and efforts for maintaining authenticity, trustworthiness, and neutrality throughout the research process.

## **Research Plan**

### **Participant Selection Procedures**

In order to explore counselor supervisors' experiences with role ambiguity, it was essential that all participants had experienced the phenomenon being studied. Criterion sampling was utilized to identify individuals who had experienced the particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). I sought out participants within a sample of counseling supervisors who were currently licensed professional counselors (LPCs). The participants in my sample also had graduate level degrees bestowed to them by CACREP accredited

institutions. I also limited my participant focus to those who had at least two years of experience as a counselor supervisor.

### **Gaining Entry**

After participants were identified, I gained entry through an initial email invitation with potential participants with a follow up voicemail if needed. The initial interview with each participant was to be conducted either in person or by using the microphone and webcam features of Skype. The second interview was to be by telephone or Skype. A third contact was through email in which I asked for any additional thoughts that each participant may have had.

At the start of the initial interview, I presented and explained the informed consent. [Appendix C] After discussing the study and the measures that would be taken to preserve confidentiality, participants were asked to sign the informed consent indicating that they understood the purpose of the study, exactly what was to be expected of them if they choose to participate, and that they agreed to participate in the study.

### **Measures to Ensure Participant Confidentiality and Safety**

To preserve confidentiality and anonymity, participants' identities were initially disguised through the use of a randomly assigned number. Observation notes, audiotaped interviews, and transcripts of the interviews were all kept in a secure location. Individual interviews were either audio or video taped. A professional transcriptionist, who was instructed to omit all personal identifying information from the typed transcripts, transcribed the auditory recordings. After the research was completed, I erased the taped interviews. All transcripts, consent forms, and data will be stored in a secure location for seven years after which time all these items will be destroyed. After completion of the

data collection and analysis, participants were sent a copy of the identified themes and codes and asked to give feedback on their accuracy.

Fontana and Frey (1998) outlined the traditional ethical considerations of research to include informed consent, right to privacy, and protection from harm. An application for exempt research was submitted and approved by the Old Dominion University Darden College Human Subjects Committee prior to collecting data.

### **Informed Consent**

Participants must be thoroughly and truthfully informed about the nature and requirements of a research study in order to give consent (Fontana & Frey, 1998). I engaged with each participant individually via Skype, email, in person, and telephone. In addition to providing a written copy of the informed consent, I read it aloud with each of the participants and answered any of their questions. The informed consent document (Appendix C) explained the potential benefits and the risks involved highlighting the voluntary nature of my research. The adult participants signed the informed consent that verified that they received this information and that they agreed to participate in the study.

### **Right to Privacy**

Each recorded interview was assigned an anonymous participant code to maintain confidentiality. A pseudonym for all the participants mentioned in the narrative of the results was used. I erased the tapes immediately after I reviewed the transcripts for accuracy. Transcripts, field notes, and memos were also labeled and kept in a locked file. Electronic versions will be kept under double lock that includes a password-protected computer kept in a locked room for five years.



## **Data Collection Procedures**

### **Individual Interviews**

Two rounds of semi-structured interviews were utilized as the primary method of data collection. Semi-structured interviews were appropriate for a phenomenological study because the interview process is flexible thereby allowing for unexpected themes to emerge (Hays & Singh, 2012). Participants were asked for an initial face to face in-person, telephonic, or Skype interview that was to last approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Before the initial interview, I sent the participants, either via email or post mail, a copy of the interview protocol so that participants had time to consider initial responses. Questions were added to the protocol as themes emerge that warranted further exploration.

The second interview occurred via Skype, in person, or telephone, and lasted approximately 30 minutes. Both the initial in-person, telephone, or Skype interview and the second Skype or telephone interview was taped and transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. A third contact occurred via email to allow the participants to supply any additional thoughts or insights after reviewing the themes or codes that had been identified. The email correspondences were printed out for analysis purposes.

### **Initial Interview Questions**

The initial interview questions were broad and general, allowing potentially unanticipated themes to emerge. Probing questions related to the overall research questions were also used to elicit more detailed responses as needed (Sutter, 2012). In addition, the interview protocol was altered as themes emerged that needed further

exploration. The following questions were asked (Appendix B) during the initial interview:

I. Opening questions:

- A. What were you taught about being a counseling supervisor?
- B. What were the steps you took to become a counseling supervisor?
- C. What were your initial impressions of your role as a counseling supervisor?

II. Central Interview Questions:

- D. What are your thoughts about Bernard's notion that counseling supervisors sometimes take on the roles of counselor, educator, and evaluator?
- E. What are your feelings about the appropriateness of these roles being the makeup for the counseling supervisor role?
- F. Please tell me your beliefs about the clarity and ambiguity of these roles in relation to you being a counseling supervisor.
- G. Tell me about your experiences and perceptions with role ambiguity.

**Document Reviews**

For the purpose of triangulation of data, documents were also reviewed. I asked each participant to complete a Participant Demographic Information form (Appendix A) either before or at the initial interview meeting. This form provided information about the counseling supervisor's professional experience. During the initial interview, I asked each counseling supervisor to supply written information, including a resume or curriculum vitae (if available), brochures or materials which they typically gave students

or used to describe their services, a professional disclosure statement, articles, and other pertinent materials like supervision agreement forms and evaluation forms if they used them.

### **Data Analysis**

Phenomenological analysis seeks to grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for a person or group of people (Patton, 2002). During the last five decades, phenomenology has taken on a number of meanings, has a number of forms, and encompasses varying traditions. Rather than attempting to generate a theory like its neighboring traditions, phenomenology's sole focus is to understand the depth and meaning of participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). I followed Clark Moustakas' data analysis procedures: epoche, bracketing, horizontalization, textural description, structural description, and structural synthesis.

The first step in phenomenological analysis is called *epoche*, a Greek word meaning to refrain from judgment, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things. With the primary and necessary step of epoche, everyday understandings, judgments, and knowing are set aside, and the phenomenon is resisted, visually, naively, in a wide-open sense, from the vantage point of a pure or transcendental ego (Moustakas, 1994). Epoche helps enable the researcher to investigate the phenomenon from a fresh and open viewpoint without prejudgment or imposing meaning too soon. This suspension of judgment is critical in phenomenological investigation and requires the setting aside of the researcher's personal viewpoint in order to see the experience for itself (Katz, 1987). In taking on the perspective of epoche, I

became aware of personal bias and ensured that I eliminated or at least gained clarity about preconceptions that I had.

After epoche, bracketing began. The critical pre-data analysis step of bracketing is the process in which the researcher's biases, meanings, and preconceptions identified during the epoche phase are suspended and taken away from the subject matter.

Bracketing allows for the phenomenon to be confronted as directly as possible as its own entity undisturbed by researcher experiences, stories, and preconceived interpretations.

My personal experiences with the phenomenon under study was fully described and bracketed as an attempt to set them aside as much as possible so that the focus of the inquiry could be directed to the participants in the study.

The next step of analysis was to develop a list of significant statements found in the data related to how the individual participants experience the topic. The significant statements were listed and preliminarily grouped. Horizontalization is the process of spreading out the data for examination and then organizing it into meaningful clusters; therefore, I developed a list of nonrepetitive and nonoverlapping statements into themes.

Once themes were extracted, I first used them to develop a textural description of the phenomenon. This textural description provided *content* and an *illustration* of *what* the participants were experiencing (Patton, 2002). Next, a structural description was constructed from the data. This structural description portrayed *how* the participants experience what they experience (Patton, 2002).

In the final stage of data analysis, the *what* and *how* of participants' experience with the phenomenon was incorporated together. This culmination is called structural synthesis and yielded the meanings and essences of the experience.

### Verification Procedures

There are several writers that searched for and found qualitative equivalents to *traditional* quantitative approaches to validation (Creswell, 2007). Just as quantitative research is evaluated in terms of its quality and soundness of research design, data collection, and analysis; in a qualitative study, the term *trustworthiness* or *authenticity* are used to assess for a study's balanced, fair, and completeness (Patton, 2002). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest four criteria that combined verify trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. The following sections describe the verification procedures used for this study.

#### Credibility

The credibility of a qualitative study is based on the degree to which the results are believed to be valid. According to Marshall and Rossman (2006), the researcher, in order to be credible, needs to demonstrate that the study is conducted in a way that the subject is appropriately identified and described. I triangulated data, engaged in the process of member checking, and collaborated with a peer debriefer. These were ways for me to add credibility to the outcomes of my study.

The data triangulated and analyzed came from multiple data sources including transcripts of individual interviews, written communication, and document review. Creswell (2007) says that the *typical* process of triangulation involves, "Corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective" (p.208).

For credibility, I was not the only one analyzing and comparing the data; I used member checking in which I shared my collection of data to the study participants and requested feedback on whether the themes and conclusions I initially made accurately

reflected their perceptions and perspectives. Lincoln and Guba (1985) encourage the use of multiple coders to increase the likelihood of the data being an accurate reflection of participant perceptions. Along with the participants, I asked a peer debriefer to investigate my data and to especially exam it for indications that my biases may have been influencing the data. These techniques minimized researcher bias and were vital in establishing the credibility of my study.

### **Transferability**

Another component of my study that was important to verify was its transferability. Enough detailed descriptions of the participants, settings, and contexts were needed for determining the degree to which results are to be applicable to individuals, or the settings in which they work (Hays & Singh, 2012). I provided thorough profiles of each interviewed participant and recorded the steps taken when I collected and analyzed data compiled into an audit trail. These thick descriptions, techniques, can help readers in determining whether or not the outcomes of this study are transferable to other individuals and contexts. Marshall and Rossman (2006) recommend using multiple cases, multiple informants, and more than one data-gathering method to strengthen a study's usefulness for other settings.

### **Dependability**

Once the outcomes of a study are deemed credible and invited by or transferred to another context, a study's shelf life is dependent upon the extent the outcomes of the study are consistent across time and among researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Consultation with the participants and peer debriefer was used while reviewing the data analysis for maintaining consistency during the duration of the study. I followed

Creswell's (2007) suggestions of: prolonged engagement, persistent observation, learning the culture and building trust with participants. I also checked for any misinformation in order to give credence to the dependability of my results.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability describes the degree to which findings of a study are *genuine reflections* of the participants' perspectives and feedback; and not a reflection of the researcher's preconceived biases or agenda (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The data should be free from researcher interference, which I attempted to prevent by having systematic data collection procedures, multiple sources of data, a reflexive journal, and an audit trail. Raw data such as field notes and transcripts, drafts of data reductions and analysis were all shared with an external auditor for examining whether or not the findings, interpretations, and my conclusions were supported by the data (Creswell, 2007).

### **Summary**

This chapter presented a qualitative research design that I used to explore counseling supervisors' experiences and perceptions of role ambiguity. This chapter included a rationale for the study, as well as a rationale for using qualitative, phenomenological methodology. Furthermore this chapter included my research questions, a description of my role as researcher, and data collection and analysis procedures. Finally, this chapter contained a description of the verification procedures that I adhered to in order to enhance the trustworthiness and authenticity of the research findings.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS**

#### **Introduction**

This study was designed to explore counseling supervisors' experiences and perceptions of role ambiguity guided by the research questions:

- What are counseling supervisors' experiences with role ambiguity?
- How do counseling supervisors experience role ambiguity?

Using a qualitative phenomenological methodology, data was collected from participant interviews and shared documents. The data was then analyzed for emerging codes and themes in order to synthesize a description of the essence of role ambiguity as experienced by counseling supervisors.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the data collection and analysis procedures followed by a demographic overview of the group of participants in this study. The next section includes a brief profile summary of each participant. Results are then presented. The key words, phrases, and themes found in the data are displayed. The final section then interprets conclusions from the data analysis.

#### **Overview of Data Collection and Analysis Procedures**

I used criterion sampling to identify potential participants from a pool of professionals in the counseling field. The criteria set was that the participants needed to have graduate degrees from CACREP accredited universities or colleges, hold state counseling licenses, and have at least two years experience conducting counseling supervision. The respondents who met criteria and agreed to participate in the study were sent a consent form (Appendix C). The participants volunteered for an initial 60-90



minute interview and a 30-minute follow-up interview. Participants were also asked to complete a Participant Demographic Information form (Appendix A) as well as provide documents such as a resume, curriculum vitae (if available), brochures, or other materials which they typically give supervisees or students that describe their services, disclosure statements, and other relevant documents such as supervision agreement forms and evaluation forms if they use them.

### **Data Collection**

**Initial Interview.** An initial interview was conducted with each of the seven participants in this study. Email correspondence was used to schedule a convenient day and time of the participant's choosing for engaging in the interview. The participants were asked to provide their preferred contact number or Skype name, or if in person the address of the meeting place. On the designated day of the interview, I met the participant and if the meeting was to be by Internet or telephone I initiated contact by calling or sending a Skype message.

In the email correspondence I reconfirmed the participants' consent to record the interviews and indicated that part of my protocol was to have the digital recorder on at the onset of the interview. Immediately after the initial pleasantries with the participants I verbally acknowledged the conversation being recorded and asked once more for consent. Following the initial casual remarks and consent to record, I began to engage with the participant following the interview protocol.

The interview protocol sought to address the research questions: "What are counseling supervisors' experiences with role ambiguity?" and, "How do counseling supervisors experience role ambiguity?" Interview questions from the protocol included:

(a) How did you first hear about counseling supervision? (b) What were your initial impressions of the role of the counseling supervisor? (c) How did you become interested in becoming a counseling supervisor? (d) Tell me about your experiences and perceptions with role ambiguity when providing counseling supervision, (e) What are your thoughts about Bernard's notion that counseling supervisors sometimes take on the roles of counselor, educator, and evaluator? (f) Please tell me if you believe that these roles are clear or ambiguous and how you relate to them as a counseling supervisor, (g) What are your feelings about the appropriateness of these roles being the makeup for the counseling supervisor role? (h) What place do these roles have within the counseling supervisory relationship?

In addition to asking these questions during the interviews, I also actively listened and responded to the participants intently in order to understand and elicit personal and detailed explanations of their experiences with the phenomenon from the participants. I utilized prompts, probes, and follow-up questions to gain clarity and a fuller understanding of their responses. I took handwritten notes during the interviews as well recording my observations and personal thoughts.

**Follow-up Interview.** The follow-up interviews followed the same procedures as the initial interviews however the protocol was modified to focus on gaining more in-depth knowledge and insight about the emerging concepts revealed during the initial interviews. No new concepts emerged upon the conclusion of the follow-up interviews. The follow-up interview was concluded with asking each participant to email documents relevant to their practice of counseling supervision.

**Documents.** All seven participants provided a completed demographic form. For three participants the demographic form was the only document that was provided. One participant emailed to me the Counseling Skills Evaluation Form he used in his supervision practice and another participant shared with me her clinical summary. One of the seven participants provided me with a copy of the supervision contract she used with supervisees, disclosure letter, and a sample supervision schedule. The last document received was sent by text through Skype messaging during a follow-up interview. The text included three supervisee response questions that were asked by one of the participants to her supervisees at the end of each supervision meeting she conducted.

### **Data Analysis Process**

The interviews were digitally recorded and the files were uploaded to a secure drive shared only with my transcriptionist. The data, which consisted of documents submitted by the participants, the interview transcriptions, and email correspondence were then printed for analysis purposes. Multiple sources of data were collected for triangulation purposes. The data collection took place over a three-month time frame.

Once the data was collected I simultaneously reviewed the documents and interview transcripts of each participant separately. I began immersing myself in the data beginning the analysis process first by compiling piles of the raw data. The piles included the interview transcripts, notes, and documents that corresponded to each participant.

Analyzing one pile at a time I read through the materials all the way through and then again raking through the texts bracketing out as many indicators of my personal experiences and identity as possible. After the second read through I read through the data once more to make sure my bracketing did not leave any residue of my assumptions

and biases. Setting aside my own preconceived interpretations, my focus was then directed solely on the voices of the participants in the study.

During the next stage of the analysis process an undetermined amount of time was allocated for searching the data for words, phrases, and other details and coded them. Significant statements were listed and grouped into meaningful clusters according to what emerging themes they related to. I compiled the individual depictions together and using the horizontalization process I reduced the data by eliminating overlapping and repetitive statements leaving essential statements, or horizons, of the collected data. The common statements from the group of individual participants, having assumed equal value, were then constructed into meaningful structural themes and textural sub-themes.

The structural themes were made up of descriptions related to what experiences the participants had with role ambiguity and the related sub-themes were participant narratives regarding how they experienced role ambiguity. These structural themes and textural sub-themes were then synthesized to form an overall portrayal of the essence of role ambiguity from a counseling supervisor's perspective.

### **Verification Procedures**

**Member Checks.** Member checks were performed throughout the data collection and analysis processes of this study. I emailed the participants a copy of the transcript and data sets to confirm the accuracy of my narrative representations of their demographics as well as their perceptions of experiences with role ambiguity. None of the participants reported an issue with the transcription or with coded data. All seven of the participants were informed that they could receive a copy of the collected data, codes, and written report at any time by request.

**Peer Debriefing.** Throughout the data collection and analysis process I had frequent contact with a peer debriefer via email, text, and telephone. My peer debriefer agreed to take on the responsibility of detecting problems in my research methods such as any incidences in which I over or under emphasized points made by the participants or any incidences where my biases or assumptions slipped through my epoche and bracketing procedures.

## **Demographic Overview**

### **Group Profile**

Participants for this study were seven professionals in the counseling field. They consisted of practicing counselors and counselor educators all of whom also assumed the role of counseling supervisor. All seven participants were assigned a numerical code to ensure confidentiality and any identifying information transcribed from the interviews was erased. Demographic information was collected utilizing a demographic form given to the participants in conjunction with scheduling their first interview. This section gives an overall profile of the participants; a detailed description of Table 1, which displays demographic information concerning gender, race and ethnicity, age, and occupation. Length of time in their professional roles and current setting(s) of their practice are also included along with an indication of the participants' field of study, degrees, and credentials.

Participants included four females and three males with five of them identifying themselves as Caucasian or White, one identifying as African American, and one participant identifying as Asian-American. Ages of the participants ranged from 31 to 63, 46 being the mean. There were five counseling supervisors currently in a

university/college setting, one of whom also noted concurrently having private practice affiliation. Two participants were working only in a business/practice setting.

The majority of the participants hold degrees in the field of counseling at the doctoral level. Two participants have doctorate degrees in the field of psychology and one participant has a Masters degree in the field of counseling. All of the participants are licensed counselors in the states in which they reside. The years of experience collectively shared in clinical settings is 17 ranging from 7 to 33 years. Five of the participants have been in a college or university setting; one of which had the least amount of time being 2 years and another having the most with 22 years of experience in a university or college setting. All seven of the participants noted their number of years in supervisory practice. The mean number of years of experience as a counseling supervisor was 12.5, with a range from 3-20 years.

The roles of the participants varied and were performed in assorted occupational settings. Five of the participants have experience as private counseling practitioners. Of those five, four also had faculty roles in universities and colleges. Three of the seven participants also worked in hospital settings. The clinics, hospitals, schools, centers, and practices were located all over the United States. The current residences of the participants included Virginia, New Jersey, New Hampshire, Ohio, and California. Because of the national expanse of the participants' locale, interviews were conducted via phone, Skype, or in person. Three participants engaged in the interviews by phone and three by Skype. One participant was interviewed in person. I collected and analyzed the data in Norfolk, Virginia.

Table 1

## Demographic Overview of Participants

Participant	Ashi	Chava	Junia
Gender	F	F	F
Age	47	56	31
Race/Ethnicity	Asian	White/Caucasian	African American
University/College Affiliation	Y	Y	Y
Business/Practice Affiliation	N/A	Y	N
Degree(s)	D	D	D
Field of degree(s)	Counseling	Counseling	Counseling
License(s)	LPC	LPCC	LPC
Certification(s)	ACS	Gestalt, Divorce mediation, Clinical MH Supervisor, NCC, ACS ACDN, ACDN	NCC, CSAC
Number of years in clinical setting(s)	15	17	7
Number of years in College/University setting(s)	22	N/A	4
Number of years in supervisory practice(s)	15	14	3
Roles in clinical setting(s)	Private practitioner, LPC and nurse manager/educator, behaviorist in family medicine practice	Private practitioner	
Roles in College/University Setting	Adjunct, visiting faculty, PhD faculty	N/A	Doctoral student, assistant faculty
Interview	Phone	Skype	Skype

Table 1 cont.

## Demographic Overview of Participants

Participant	Geordi	Keen	Zappa	Sifu
Gender	M	F	M	M
Age	51	34	42	63
Race/Ethnicity	White	White	Caucasian	Caucasian
University/College Affiliation	Y	Y	N	N
Business/Practice Affiliation	N/A	N	Y	Y
Degree(s)	D	D	D	M.A.
Field of degree(s)	Psychology	Counseling	Psychology	Counseling
License(s)	Licensed Psychologist, LCPC, LIMFT	LPCC	LPC	LPC
Certification(s)		NCC, CSII	ATR-BC	CCS
Number of years in clinical setting(s)	24	2.5	19	33
Number of years in College/University setting(s)	21	2.5	10	N/A
Number of years in supervisory practice(s)	20	3	13.5	19
Roles in clinical setting(s)	Private practitioner, university clinician	Private practitioner, agency clinician	Psychiatric hospital, outpatient clinic, community mental health clinic, VA Hospital, juvenile detention, public school clinician	RTC therapist, CSB clinician
Roles in College/University Setting	Professor, senior staff psychologist	Career counselor, adjunct faculty, assistant	College counseling center clinician	Student (B.S, M.A)



		faculty		
Interview	Phone	Skype	In Person	Phone

Note: Female=F, Male=M, Yes=Y, No=N, Not Available=N/A, Doctorate=D, Masters of Arts=M.A., Licensed Professional Counselor=LPC, Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor=LPCC, Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor=LCPC, Licensed Independent Marriage and Family Therapist=LIMFT, Approved Clinical Supervisor=ACS, Mental Health=MH, Approved Collaborative Divorce Neutral=ACDN, National Certified Counselor=NCC, Certified Substance Abuse Counselor=CSAC, Certified in Strong Interest Inventory=CSII, Board Certified Art Therapist=ATR-BC, Community Counseling School=CCS, Residential Treatment Center=RTC, Community Service Board=CSB

### **Individual Participant Profiles**

Using triangulated data sources (transcriptions of interviews, responses on demographic form, and documents collected from correspondence) from participants, I created a brief profile summary of each individual. Initially, each participant was given a random participant ID number to ensure the confidentiality of the participants and protect the data from subjective intrusions from the researcher during the coding procedures. Following the data collection and analysis procedures pseudonyms were given to the participants being a more appropriate way to reference the participants and their voices rather than the original random impersonal ID numbers.

**Geordi** was a 51-year-old male who worked at a college serving as a professor. Geordi was also a licensed professional counselor and maintained his counseling practice apart from his faculty duties. For over 20 years, Geordi had been supervising as well. Having plenty of experience being a counseling supervisor, Geordi did not pause when he stated that it was a fact that there is a lot of confusion in the supervisory relationship.

Geordi related his supervisory work to his overall work as a human being. He stated, "The nature of life is to be complicated and messy; it's part of what it is to be human, and embracing that, we have the opportunity to embrace our humility" and that,

“Part of being a supervisor, being a person is just trying to embrace that ambiguity.”

Practicing yoga and meditation also assisted Geordi embrace ambiguity. Being in his own therapy for 15 plus years was also critical for Geordi.

According to Geordi, it was more than just learning how to embrace ambiguity. Having an experiential background to understand supervisees and move with them into the places they struggle was a much more valuable attribute to have according to Geordi. The practices of yoga, meditation, and being in therapy helped Geordi appreciate his personal issues, different kinds of emotional and psychological states, and how to work with those things. “Being safe to be myself, to be a full human being with a full range of emotions;” Integrating his own emotionality into his work as a supervisor was very important to Geordi.

**Junia** was a woman 31 years of age and identified herself being African-American. Junia marked the genesis of her supervision practice as being when she began her doctoral program. At the time of the study Junia worked as a faculty member at a university. Even though she was not currently practicing as a counselor, Junia had seven years of clinical practice experience in a variety of settings. Junia shared that it was refreshing to see a different side of counseling when she entered her doctoral program. With having seven years experience counseling and four years in an educative role, Junia said that developing and practicing being a counseling supervisor was a challenge for her both personally and professionally.

These experiences as an adult provided Junia with a positive lens to see ambiguity. She admitted that being a supervisor was something good for her, something that inspired growth. Junia did not always have this view on ambiguity. She attributed

having a foundational aversion to ambiguity to her growing up in a military household where, according to Junia, “Not knowing where you are going and how you are going to get there was ‘not cool’.”

**Keen** was a 34-year-old woman working in a university setting as an adjunct faculty member. Prior to her working as a professor, Keen spent almost 3 years practicing counseling in agency, university, and private settings and thus far has three years experience also being a counseling supervisor. Keen shared her belief that supervision is something she engages in to continue to grow and contribute to the counseling profession.

In her personal and professional life Keen didn’t think she needs to hide her being unsure following up with, “that’s just life.” Keen had been realizing throughout her education and professional work that there was never one right way and there was never one right answer. There was one caveat Keen made sure to mention. If there was evidence that there was harm being enacted then that was the only time there was one right way and that was to take the actions to stop the harm and attempt to heal from it. Keen admitted that she had biases; ones that she knew of and ones that she was not aware of ‘yet’. So she herself continued to seek out supervision attesting to its personal and professional value.

**Ashi** was an Asian woman 47 years old who worked at a university. Ashi was proud of her career longevity and positive aging in her professions. It was shared by Ashi that early in her career she was nervous because she didn’t know what she was supposed to be doing and those were times that she experienced ambiguity; ambiguity from not being in charge of defining her own roles and not having someone clearly defining them

for her. She was no longer nervous however because she knew what she's supposed to do. Ashi expressed that she gets to do what she loves and she gets to define her roles as she saw fit.

It was comforting for Ashi to say she didn't know something or to share when something excited her when she heard something new. Ashi spoke of her confidence and peace within herself to say it's okay to feel passionate about what she's doing and liked the people she does it for as well.

**Chava** identified herself on the demographic information form as being 56 years old, Caucasian, and having 17 plus years experience in clinical practice and supervision. Both her work as a professional counselor and counseling supervisor have mostly been in a private practice setting although Chava also spoke of her experience engaging in supervisor trainings, sitting on counseling supervision boards, and also having varied credentials and licensures highlighting her interest and experience with mediation, resolution, human development, and learning.

Chava liked the idea of sharing and joining in the middle someplace to share ideas. Her collaborative nature was illustrated by her numerous and broad career endeavors. Chava's fantasy, which she intends on realizing, is to have a world where, "We are all working to help people communicate better, have a better knowledge of ourselves, teach students how to be more curious about the world, about themselves, and about others." To Chava it is not scaling what is good and bad as it is about figuring out what is most effective with the world, with the students, with the clients, and with our colleagues.

**Zappa** was 42 years old and identified himself as male and Caucasian. Zappa was in a private practice where he was providing counseling services. The position evolved from 19 years of clinical work in a multiple of settings such as psychiatric hospitals, juvenile detention centers, military and civil service clinics, and public schools. Along with learning, training, and practicing counseling, Zappa also had 14 years plus years of being a counseling supervisor.

One of the main motivations for Zappa as he continued developing and practicing as a counseling supervisor was that he had the hope to learn as much as the supervisee learned during the supervisory process. Zappa believed that the intention for his personhood and professional work was that it is a learning process, a relationship, with both people getting something out of it. According to Zappa, collaboration with others, whether they are peers, colleagues, students, or clients, took away the responsibility away from having to be the expert on, "Every single thing out there.."

Zappa didn't want to come into a supervisory relationship with the attitude of, "I know everything." He explained that he did not want the pressure of having to know everything which was extended to not wanting to arrive with the expectation of doing and saying everything perfectly. Zappa proclaimed that doing and saying everything perfectly every single time was not realistic.

**Sifu** was a male 63 years old listing his race/ethnicity as Caucasian. Sifu worked for a community service board providing professional counseling to clients and counseling supervision to other clinicians. Before working in the community based clinic Sifu had experience being a counselor and counselor supervisor at residential treatment

centers as well. Sifu noted that the six years experience in a university setting indicated on his demographic information form was in a student capacity only.

In the 33 years plus of working experience and current professional practice, Sifu has made a point to continue attending trainings and meetings focused on many aspects of the counseling profession. He explained that he learned by, “Getting out in the trenches and in the field, interacting with folks who need help” and with folks who are providing the help. Sifu confessed that he had yet to find a training or course on the art of supervision although Sifu thought that with most everything there was an art and the art was developed through experience.

Sifu stated his belief that there was a tendency of ego getting in the way of learning and developing personally and professionally. Receptivity through supervision was important according to Sifu and setting aside the ego was a vital component for people to be willing and able to look at themselves and to also sit back and receive feedback. With confidence, Sifu asserted, “It is okay to be wrong, there is a lot we have to learn..” He believed we grow through experiences and that competencies and character came from finding out what was not right and make modifications and enhancing what was already right.

Early in his professional development Sifu observed himself and others wanting to come across as confident. “You wanted to look good,” said Sifu; “You want to receive a positive sense from the person who is in the other chair who is assisting you in your process..” And according to Sifu, that was the influence and defense element of the ego. Seasoned in his personal and professional career, Sifu made efforts to check his ego at the door and invited his supervisees to do the same. Sifu said, “Life is about balance..”

## **Results**

The following section presents the results from analyzing data collected from interviews and documents provided by the participants. The results of the study are organized into six major themes and interrelated sub-themes. The first major theme, Roles, was supported by the sub-themes: Attribution to Pillar Roles and Ancillary Makeup. Theme two, Competencies, was sustained by the sub-themes: Training and Mentorship. Sub-themes Intentionality and Confidences reinforced the third major theme, Management Style, and the fourth major theme, Career Endeavors, was supported by the sub-themes Maturity and Multiculturalism. Feelings was the fifth major theme and Triggers and Sensations emerged as its sub-themes. The sixth and last major theme, Effects, was supported by the sub-themes Reactions and Expressions. The identified structural themes and the textural sub-themes that emerged from the data are narrated below.

### **Theme 1: Roles**

The Roles theme included roles described by the participants that provided structure for the counseling supervisors' perception of their professional identity as a whole. The participants named positions they said cultivated from inside and outside of the counseling field that they perceived to be the parts of their role as being a professional counseling supervisor. Subthemes included what roles the participants related to that were widely recognized by the counseling profession as well as what roles participants adopted that they perceived as part of their identity however not as commonly acknowledged as professional positions.

#### **Sub-Theme 1.1: Attribution to Pillar Roles**

The seven participants all acknowledged their acceptance and relation to the pillar roles, counselor, educator, and evaluator. The participants recognized these three roles as being validated by the counseling profession and necessary. The participants realized each role's importance and gave credit to their functionality within the counseling supervisor context.

Junia said, "There is a lot of freedom in being able to teach but not be a professor; being able to counsel a little bit but not be their [supervisees] counselor.." Zappa shared a similar sentiment when he remarked, "You can't just be a counselor because you're not their counselor. If you are just the evaluator you might as well be a paper pusher. If you're just an educator, well, you are talking about just teaching.." Geordi agreed that there had to be the three elements (counselor, educator, and evaluator). Ashi also concurred however she referred to the elements as wearing hats: "I think part of the identity is that you have the educator hat, the clinical hat, and the administrative hat."

When talking about counseling, Keen referred to counseling as, "Really more about biases, or triggers, or transference, or personal care, or self-things that come up that can really effect their [supervisees'] work with clients." Similarly, Zappa stated that he was, "Not doing counseling per se but supporting, empathizing, and helping the supervisees understand their own issues impacting any countertransference or anything like that.." The role *counselor* suggested to Sifu that, "The supervisor in a sense puts himself or herself in the shoes of the trainee in terms of what I would have done, considered, thinking, and formulating.."

"I always find myself working in some kind of teachable moment,," said Junia. Zappa related to this when he stated, "The educative role is for helping the supervisee



weave book knowledge and application together..” Sifu remarked that in terms of education, teaching along the way what seemed to be most effective was the most stimulating part of being a supervisor. However Sifu went on to say, “As you know academic training and book learning is just a scratch..” Likewise Keen remarked, “My role as supervisor is a facilitator of learning, it is learning about all those things, the client, the profession, best practice, current practices.” Chava also spoke of the counselor and educator roles of her counseling supervisor identity when she said she, “Talks to them about them.” She went on by stating that she did it in a professional way, not a therapeutic way, in order to help the supervisee grow professionally meaning, “It sometimes feels like therapy, sometimes it feels like I’m teaching them something, and sometimes it feels like I need to caution them as a gatekeeper.”

Clearly, according to Chava, “There is one person, and it may move back and forth, who has the power..” Sifu, like Chava, discussed aspects of the evaluator role, as he perceived it, as part of his counseling supervisor identity. He stated that the supervisor assumed that role (evaluator), to determine to what extent the person was really getting it and was growing through the experience. Junia agreed, as she shared that she thought it would be, “A disservice to the field as well as the community if we just pass along people who didn’t live up to our skill set.”

### **Sub-Theme 1.2: Ancillary Makeup**

The participants all spoke about perceiving their counseling supervisor identity as a conglomeration of the pillar roles in the counseling field: counselor, educator, and evaluator. All seven participants further disclosed that they also perceived their identity to be made up by a number of ancillary, or additional roles as well. Chava, while

laughing, told of an additional role, unbeknownst to the expert researchers in the field. She revealed that she added one more term and she, “Hasn’t told Diane Borders yet.”

Chava perceived the consultant or a collaborative role as part of the identity of the counseling supervisor. Zappa also saw himself as a collaborator as did Keen. Junia also expressed that the counseling supervisor identity should be more collaborative stating that, “There will be times where consultation and collaboration with other colleagues will be critical.”

Ashi mentioned that in the role of a counseling supervisor, “You are an advisor, collegial in a professional sense. You are a scholar, practitioner, supervisor, and manager..” Zappa agreed that, “There seems to be an advisory capacity..” Geordi and Sifu shared similar perspectives. Geordi stated, “You are blending the role of evaluator with the role of a coach, with the role of an advocate..” Sifu also saw aspects of his identity like a coach and mentor. Keen also perceived her identity like a coach however she called it a facilitator.

## **Theme 2: Competencies**

The Competencies theme includes the situational contexts that counseling supervisors perceive as foundational for structuring their professional identity. According to the participants, how counseling supervisors perceived their own competencies was a factor in how they perceived their counseling supervisor identity. Subthemes include what training the participants experienced and what their experiences with mentors have been.

### **Sub-Theme 2.1: Training**

A few of the participants admitted that they did not have any “real” or “formal” training. Zappa, one of the participants who admitted to having no “real training” in providing supervision, shared that he took some workshops and did a little research himself. Sifu didn’t have any formal training either, although in recent years he shared that, “There has become a certification to be a supervisor and I have gone through that process..” Ashi was another participant who indicated that her formal training came later in her career. She indicated, “It was in 2005 where the credential became available to be an approved supervisor so that is when I completed my training to formally become a clinical supervisor.”

For Keen and Junia it was in their doctoral program where they learned and had training to be a counseling supervisor. Keen stated that she was a supervisee in her graduate program however it was when she was a doctoral student that she learned about the different supervision theories. Keen shared, “There was a lot that I learned in the program that I didn’t know and that I wasn’t doing before either.” Junia also didn’t have supervision courses in her graduate program so she, “Had to take the intro to supervision course during the first semester as a doctoral student, and that was the first time I had ever done it.” Junia went on saying that she “Didn’t feel prepared” and that she “Didn’t have any experience providing supervision at all.”

Junia learned that supervision was more about personal growth while she was a doctoral student. Chava on the other hand while in graduate school got trained as a Gestalt therapist and learned, “A lot about myself professionally and personally” that way. Geordi, like most of the participants, did not have courses in supervision while he was a student although he attributes his training to receiving supervision of supervision.

### **Sub-Theme 2.2: Mentorship**

Most of the participants attributed a part of their identity and competency as a counseling supervisor to the mentors they had all along the way through their professional development. Sifu spoke to this when he said, “I think when most of us in the field get started in a supervisory role, and we essentially draw from our own experiences and certainly try to retrieve memories about what it was like when we were getting started.” Ashi said she hoped that people have good role models so they can get a good idea how supervision is done. . Zappa also agreed when he remarked, “My supervision experiences shaped how I was a supervisor in the future--positive and negative.”

Junia shared that, “It was refreshing. Someone was trying to take me to a different level of my personal and professional world.” She told of a time in her doctoral program when she was told to let her outside supervisor go and “Just get up with someone in the program.” Junia refused. She said, “I really liked my supervisor and I felt like I grew a lot from him and I can learn a lot from him so I kept him for the whole time.” Chava had a slightly different experience where she told herself to seek out other professional supervisors because her, “Regular supervision sucked” although the positive was that she, “Learned what not to do.”

### **Theme 3: Management Style**

This Management Style theme illustrates counseling supervisors’ attitudes and the effects they have on counseling supervisor management style. The participants voiced thoughts about their attitudes being derived from their intentionality and confidences as a counseling supervisor.

### **Sub-Theme 3.1: Intentionality**

Collectively and separately, the participants made remarks about counseling supervisors' management of their roles being styled in part by what their attitudes were regarding their intentionality. Ashi expressed that her intention was to, "Really promote the next generation to be there to do the next generation of things." Ashi made it clear however that, "It is not like we shoot from the hip." It's about going into the profession knowing what the roles are and how they're defined; knowing you are coming into this as a scholar, a practitioner, and educator, and mentor. Keen didn't have an issue playing all of the roles. She said, "It's fun, I think it's fine. I think it's necessary." Sifu called it, "Being able to adjust as the flow requires."

According to Sifu, "If you are in a counselor mode, that doesn't obligate the education or training aspects of that collective; they are all complimentary in their own way. If there is a concern at one point of the time what can be addressed there can also be complemented in the other areas." Chava interceded when there were, "Inevitable difficulties." Geordi agreed, when he remarked, "It is part of the nature of life to be complicated and messy and as much as we try to simplify it and try to make it tidy it is always going to resist our efforts to do that and so to me part of being a therapist, being a supervisor, being a person, is just trying to embrace that ambiguity, to move through it and as gracefully as possible; we are blending these roles." Further Geordi shared that, "It's not about expecting them to be perfect or not have issues but it is expecting them to be open to noticing when those issues are coming into play and that means being open to feedback that the supervisor gives."

Sifu noted that he preferred to work with a wobble rather than a mess: “I think of it like a bar stool and you know they all have to equally support what’s in place, the person, the object, whatever it is securing. If one of those points is not secure, then you have got a wobble. They need to be equally applied, there should be a sense of a level playing field with that balance.” Following that analogy Junia stated that she identified herself, “Primarily as a counselor educator which can be contagious to your supervisees if you are not careful because you want them to see themselves as professional counselors because they are not in a doctoral program yet, they are just getting their masters degree, trying to get licensed, so I just have to be careful with how I frame and word things so that it is not too educational.”

Junia went on when she said, “I have to separate out my job as the professor and myself as a previous counselor. But that doesn’t mean that I won’t ever do the teaching part because I think that is very important; I definitely want them to feel like they are gaining skills and knowledge that will help them work with clients.” Zappa related when he said, “You can use your knowledge and your experience to educate them” however it was, “Helping somebody figure out things for themselves and what works for them. It’s not my job to tell you how to do something because everybody has a different style of approaching things.” Zappa also styled roles in a way to keep the relationship as egalitarian as possible. “You have to have an alliance...more educative or evaluative always feel like something is missing; it doesn’t bring the human aspect in” and, “If you’re squelching creativity and not allowing supervisees to really search for themselves I think it is *futile*.”

### **Sub-Theme 3.2: Confidences**

The sub-theme, Confidences, related to the participants indicating that their confidences in each of the supervisory roles factored in to their management style. Geordi proposed that he thought, “It has a lot to do with the temperament of the supervisor.” Backing up his statement Geordi remarked that, “Some supervisors are more interested in connecting and engaging with supervisees so they are going to feel more comfortable with the therapy dimension” just as much as Geordi saw, “The others who are not so interested in that or are even uncomfortable with those kinds of things are the people who are going to feed on the separate roles; they have to find the navigating of the crossing of those roles more challenging.” Geordi explained the reason it was challenging was because, “They need to make it more explicit and clear cut because the part that they are working with isn’t just the students’ discomfort, but their own.”

Junia said that she went back to what she was comfortable with and what she thought she was good at and that was, “The counselor education piece. Being a counselor supervisor gives me that chance to pull on my experience as a professional counselor and my experience as a counselor educator.” Zappa, on the other hand, promoted challenging the comfort zone. “We are human beings not automatons,” proclaimed Zappa. He gave himself and others permission, “To be instead of always being on, and be right, and be perfect.” Ashi related when she shared, “I am a great person that learns from other people’s mistakes, I love to hear people’s stories. I am a vicarious learner. I have learned the art of just ask. I have learned the fine art of asking and negotiating and being okay if someone says, ‘No, that’s not going to work’.” Sifu agreed when he stated, “I don’t think that everybody can be all things to all people.” Chava found that appealing. She said, “I

think I become a better supervisor if I'm less rigid; I think by nature I am a very collaborative person."

Keen shared, "I could be a counselor for a personal issue or the personalization piece, or I could be a teacher related to the conceptualization piece. You really have to in your own mind be clear about what role it is you are playing at that moment and have to be flexible just as much. I like that you never really know, but you have the tools in your back pocket."

#### **Theme 4: Career Endeavors**

##### **Sub-Theme 4.1: Maturity**

The sub-theme Maturity related to the participants indicating that their maturity was directly influenced by their career endeavors. "It's kinda like an athlete. The experienced ones have the greatest value," said Sifu. Chava shared the same notion when she said, "It's easy to jump through the hoops to become a supervisor but you may not have the identity yet. You haven't developed, because you don't have enough experience to have developed." Junia acknowledged that she was, "Not there yet. I am still growing with my roles." To get *there*, according to Zappa, took stepping outside to that, "Uncomfortable square and face the uncomfortable, the disgusting, the rageful, whatever. You have to face the harsh reality to grow."

It was more than just going out and facing the messiness. Geordi said to, "Try to deal with it as maturely and wisely as possible, but always imperfectly." Imperfectly because as Zappa put it, "There is always someone out there who knows more than you do. Not that you have to know everything. There is always something you can learn too; so you don't feel like you know everything."



Ashi stated that maturity enabled her to, “know how to say sorry better” and that came from her 15 years of experience. Junia shared that she reminded herself of that very notion when she stated, “There’s a piece of me that says hold on. You are still growing and learning and not expected to be perfect.” Zappa agreed, when he remarked, “Just because you have a license doesn’t mean that you are the expert.” Likewise, Sifu stated, “A person in a supervisory role, who is invested in that process, who truly cares what that hour, what that encounter is about, they the supervisor, him or herself grows from the experience of being in that role.” “I don’t think it comes naturally,” remarked Sifu. “They can do it, they can hand check the boxes, and they can do the time,” but Sifu thought the person, “Needs to be seasoned, and be experienced in order to grow in that role..”

#### **Sub-Theme 4.2: Multiculturalism**

The sub-theme Multiculturalism related to the participants’ acknowledgement that their career endeavors enhanced their sense and appreciation of multiculturalism. When Ashi said, “That’s what we do” she was referring to getting and being prepared for the diversity that comes with enacting our roles in the counseling profession. Ashi went on to say that, “We would be faulty not to have those discussion.” Zappa reinforced the inevitability of diversity when he said,

We are talking about people and people aren’t just numbers on a scatter plot, they are people, and you have an obligation and a responsibility to your patient or supervisee to meet their needs and if that means working with them from a different theoretical perspective then that is what you do.

Geordi described it as, “A process of joint curiosity.” Additionally Sifu also agreed when he stated, “Each individual receives feedback in different ways” and these

were the reasons backing up Zappa when he said we were, “Obligated to speak their language.” Sifu, along the same vein remarked,

You don’t have to get what I have found. When I share what I think is an apparent matter and they look at you like, ‘have you lost your mind?’ Or you get the sense that they are not really receiving it, and you have to be okay with that too. It’s out there and it can be revisited in a different way at a different time, and then that person will be ready for it in another moment.

Chava attributed the not being okay to what she was thinking were the times when it was forgotten that, “Despite the fact that students may be new to the counseling field, often they come with a lot of different types of life experience.” With that Chava also stated, “We could actually be equals around other things that we’re talking about in the supervision process.” Junia spoke about her experiences and pointed out that it was common for people in marginalized cultures to have their actions be influenced and motivated by “Not wanting to be disempowered, or wrong, or perceived as less than or wrong.”

Keen was another participant who shared her thoughts about the role of power in counseling supervision. She spoke about her sense that,

Not enough time is spent in supervisor training talking about the role of power, and what power means to the supervisor, and how power is exerted, and what empowerment looks like, and how the supervisors can empower our supervisees instead of power over our supervisees.

## **Theme 5: Feelings**

The Feelings theme includes the situations and conditions that provide the structure for counseling supervisors' emotionality. The participants explained that it was the triggers, both observed and perceived, that spurred typical and complex sensations felt by counseling supervisors.

### **Sub-Theme 5.1: Triggers**

The sub-theme Triggers related to the participants pointing out the triggers for identified feelings. Chava eloquently phrased a sentiment shared by all of the participants when she said, "Nobody has the same mood and stance and frame of reference and frame of mind. No supervisee does all of the time so they have life moving in and out all of the time anyway and as we come in with supervision we have to move with them." Geordi added, "What feels most important is the sense that the supervisee is always in motion. When supervisees don't have that openness to their own process and openness to feedback from the supervisor; an openness to continue learning, a trigger is recognized and pulled so that motion can resume "

"There's something going on," said Keen when she described the triggers that sparked her emotions. Keen stated that at times there were points when all three roles were being excited that created a "stirring within" and she was "Not quite sure what direction we have to take and the decision we have to make in the moment." Keen described these points of not sure, "What role to take or about to take" as an emotional trigger; points of lacking confidence said Keen.

Similarly to Keen, Sifu also illustrated situations "Where there was a lot going on" as a trigger for him. In a 'traditional setting' where the supervisor often had a multitude of administrative responsibilities, time constraints, and numerous obligations

was most likely where counseling supervisors were triggered the most. Sifu was also triggered when he was sharing company with supervisees or other supervisors whom, “Consciously or otherwise may find that supervision is an inconvenience or imposition to spend the hour.” Ashi reported being triggered by systemic constraints as well when she acknowledged being triggered by working in systems that did not have a clear designated time to be a counseling supervisor.

Chava noted being triggered by her tendency to, “Want to change things that don’t work.” Likewise Geordi remarked, “I am most interested in areas where we saw things very discrepantly.” The participants were triggered by things they saw, by places they were in, and also triggered by the things they hear. Zappa, for instance, stated that listening from a more counselor perspective elicits triggers different from the triggers found by listening from an educational perspective.

Gaps in education triggered Zappa to find out what is missing such as not having enough education on culture. When Zappa was “In the counselor role” he focused on emotions, which was a trigger for him. Zappa shared that when he found himself getting too involved or using too much “*Clinese*, or therapy words” a countertransference bell rang. Serving in the evaluator role also brought about triggers for Zappa. “Having the final say whether a person gets in or doesn’t get in, when I know this person isn’t going to make it, when I know this person isn’t going to get through the process” triggered the realization of Zappa’s credentials and responsibility. Similarly, Ashi was triggered when recognizing that her decisions directly impacted someone else’s career.

Geordi bluntly stated that at a certain point we needed to make an evaluation; all of the participants agreed. “There’s the whole judgmental aspects” that triggered Junia

and others. Recognizing having the power to decide triggered a questioning of confidence within Junia. She was triggered when she thought about and questioned her own training when she was challenged or when there was an ethical dilemma. Like Chava who stated that she was a better supervisor when she was less rigid, Junia too did not have clearly defined roles and developed a mutual respect with the supervisee. Junia however was triggered when she had to stop and take a moment when, “Things are not all well and good, when she [I] notices that potential harm is being done.”

### **Sub-Theme 5.2: Sensations**

The sub-theme Sensations related to the participants discussing the sensations related to the feelings they had when experiencing role ambiguity. For the most part the participants held the same opinion as Geordi in that the triggered feelings within the supervisory relationship were almost all difficult. Geordi expressed being fortunate to not have his worry sense triggered too often. Junia also discussed having a sensation of being worried at times while supervising. One other participant, Zappa, felt the sensation of being worried. He also made remarks about feelings of anxiety, fear, and frustration.

Ashi on the other hand commented not only on her feeling a blend of, “Nervous and scared all in one” but also having sensations of feeling peaceful and joy. Keen agreed too describing her feeling excited and having “butterflies” in the pit of her stomach. Junia stated that she felt a weighted and bogged down sensation at times and reported those feelings to be uncomfortable which frustrates her. The sensations Junia preferred to feel were hopeful, safe, and confident. Feeling good and positive were sensations that Chava progressed from as well. Sifu in similar fashion discussed feeling confident, proud, empowered along with the “weighty” sensation identified by the other participants.

A climate of fear according to Geordi was a sensation needing to happen sometimes. The uneasy feelings described by Geordi, Zappa, Ashi, Keen, and Junia lead to other more welcomed sensations. When the excitement and nervousness was felt by Keen, she also felt a heightened awareness, guard, and vigilance. Sifu agreed when he remarked having had feelings of courageousness and humbleness.

### **Theme 6: Effects**

All seven of the participants stated that they were affected by their emotions while they were in the supervisory relationship. The feelings provided conditions that influenced the participants' reactions and expressions. This Effect theme illustrated the effects of emotionality on counseling supervisors. Textural sub-themes included a portrayal of what reactions counseling supervisors had as well as a description of what expressions counseling supervisors made when affected by emotions.

#### **Sub-Theme 6.1: Reactions**

The sub-theme Reactions was related to the participants speaking about the reactions they had from the effects of role ambiguity. When Junia stopped to take a moment, "There are so many things that go through my mind" and she noticed a "shift." Keen too spoke about a shift, more specifically a, "gearing up and preparation" to shift. Gearing up, heightening awareness of "stuff," as Sifu called it, and keeping the roles together "not wanting to parcel them out 100%," which Zappa warned would be dangerous, were all reactions shared by the participants in their attempt to regain balance and resolve the dissonant effect of feelings. Geordi spoke of reacting with inhibition to, "Become comfortable with all of the interval experiences and emotional states and to be comfortable with facing their countertransference issues and reactions."

Zappa reacted by reminding himself that discomfort was the way people learn and that, “You are not doing yourself or your supervisee any service because you are stuck.” Zappa reacted by “backing up” or “moving forward” however, he and also Geordi, Keen, and Junia first responded to their emotions with asking questions. “How much of this is my stuff? How much of this is their stuff?” asked Zappa. “Did I miss something? Is there something I should have talked about that was really important?” are questions that Keen asked herself. Junia also reacted by questioning herself and shared a few examples: “Is this someone I can figure out something with? What should I report? What should I keep to myself? Is this an issue that maybe needs some gatekeeping?” Reacting with curiosity is what Ashi attributed to, “Never being bored.” Ashi went on to say that she expected and was not surprised by her reactions. She stated that she “Thrives off of having different experiences throughout the week.”

All of the participants confessed that they were affected by the feelings they had within the supervision session. For instance, Geordi stated that, “Moving into the evaluator role is hard because we are therapist and we want to be supportive of people.” He attempted to become comfortable with shifting towards an evaluator role especially when having to, “Evaluate the ways that are indicating to the supervisees they are not performing well.” Geordi also shared that regardless of meeting the goal of comfortableness, there was a “certain point” when it was essential to react and move into the “gatekeeper of the field” position.

Junia stated that her spirituality directly conflicted with the evaluation role and she reacted with subjectivity and confusion. She explained that, “People’s personal struggles get to me and I cannot pass judgment, spiritually for me I was taught not to, I

am not good enough to judge anybody.” Keen made sure she reacted in a way that allowed her to watch for her biases because when she was affected by emotions she “Personally kind of freeze up in that moment.” Emotions affected Zappa’s grip and stance in the session and explained that he reacts to the “slip.” He also shared that he reacted by wanting to make sure he was, “Doing and saying the right thing” even though, “That’s not a feeling I relish.”

There were participants such as Sifu who reported to not struggle with the effects of their emotions. Sifu attributed being familiar with the sensations that prevented him from struggling. The reminder boosted his confidence, which motivated him to react with risk taking, making changes, and feeling free. Chava bypassed the reaction altogether and although she admittedly was embarrassed to say it, Chava stated that she was probably unconscious and unaware of any shifts that happened as an effect of her emotions. She went on to share a reaction she did have consciously in which she patted herself on the back for reacting with silence.

### **Sub-Theme 6.2: Expressions**

A description of expressions made by counseling supervisors after being affected by their feelings further adds to the texture of the emotionality experienced by counseling supervisors. The participants all spoke about what the effect of their feelings have when expressing themselves within the counseling supervision relationship. Part of the art of any intervention is making it look seamless and not gear driven was how Sifu began to explain the effect of emotions on his performance during supervision sessions. Sifu described being affected by his emotions in such a way so that he felt, “Free to share doubts, concerns, and inadequacies.” Sifu explained that there were moments when he



was being affected by the numerous feelings triggered within the supervision relationship which got him to, “Stand up and say that I don’t know; That I’m dumb in this moment so to speak.” Sifu also shared that he advocated for the, “Absolute need to seek and be receptive to supervision.”

Chava agreed with Sifu when he remarked, “I’m looking from them for feedback, the next time they’ll have the power.” The power to elicit or become aware of emotional sensations and be affected by them and the resulting changes that occur compelled Geordi to manifest, “An environment where those things [emotions] are seen as normal and not overly pathologized and that it’s about training that raw sensitivity that we all have rather than trying to wall it away and box it off.” Zappa, had a similar perspective. He noted his efforts to normalize emotions within the supervisory relationship. Zappa said he, “Uses a lot of my own feelings and reactions when I talk it out with the supervisee.”

Zappa called it a risk and a pushing of boundaries to acknowledge and express his feelings, specifically “the discomfort.” Zappa pointed out the effects of emotions that became issues that were interfering with the progression of the supervision process. Issues related to countertransference especially got a lot of attention from Zappa and the other participants. All of the participants shared their experiences with being affected by feelings related to countertransference.

Expressions made stemming from the supervisor being affected by feelings may suggest that the counseling supervisor has training, experience, and confidence with processing all the dynamics that occur and is an attempt to transfer those attributes to the supervisee. Ashi shared her thoughts about expressing her feelings to assure herself and

the supervisee that she doesn't feel confused or overwhelmed when being affected by emotions; "Just wait until you get there, it's so pleasant." Conversely, when Zappa perceived himself sounding "really touchy feely" when he got the sense that there was "Something that the supervisee is needing and that they are not getting." The effect is Zappa felt like he wanted to, "jump in and help." Zappa explained that when his feelings were expressed in a manner that he, "found myself getting too involved" Zappa saw that as his countertransference reaction and he acknowledged the pushing of boundaries and talked that out and listened to what the supervisee was saying.

Zappa stated that he did not want to feel like the complete authority. Keen shared that from experience she was aware that not all counseling supervisors expressed their emotions focused on wellness and sharing. Chava also made remarks about being aware that some counseling supervisors communicated their feelings by, "Going for the jugular of their limitations." Keen explained that some supervisors come off more aggressively, powerful, and demanding and that they express their feelings that is, "overly emotional or intense."

"You don't have to be everybody's wake up call, if it works for them let it work for them," stated Chava. Junia agreed when she remarked that she, "Tells myself that it's going to be okay, it won't take away from my competence. Acknowledge the opportunity to grow and figure it out with the supervisee." Junia also noted that her asking or not asking a personal question about the supervisee was a way that her feelings related to evaluation was expressed. Keen shared her stance that expressions of counseling supervisors' feelings should be, "very clear with the supervisee that it is not their responsibility, it's not their fault but that I am really jarred and this is why I'm jarred."

Trying to bring the emotionality into the room was the foundation from which Geordi said counseling supervisors sit ideally. Geordi continued by telling of his finding that there was, “Too much in the field now that people are so worried about boundaries, and other things, that it creates a climate of fear for the students, and they don’t have the experience of being held and received in their imperfections. So then of course they can’t really be a whole complete person themselves, and they can’t figure it out, they don’t really have modeling or opportunity to figure out how to really bring all these pieces of me together as a therapist.”

### **Summary of Findings**

The findings and results presented in this chapter were to answer the central research questions of this study: “What are counseling supervisors’ experiences with role ambiguity?” and, “How do counseling supervisors experience role ambiguity?” After analyzing the data, I found that from the results emerged six major themes supported by sub-themes.

The first and second themes revealed the participants’ perceptions of their professional identity. They explained their identity being structured by the roles counselor, educator, and evaluator and perceived them as being pillars of their profession. The participants also reported viewing themselves as collaborators, mentors, consultants, coaches, and advocates, which they agreed were axillary roles found outside of the professional counseling field. The participants discussed their professional identity being made up according to how they perceive their competencies in each role. They conceptualized their competencies as a result of their trainings and mentorship. The supervisors’ trainings ranged from academic, professional, and personal learning

experiences. The participants shared their experiences, both positive and negative, having been mentored along their way to become counseling supervisors.

The third and fourth themes showed participants describing the effects of their attitudes on their role management. The participants reported that their role management was structured by their management style as well as by their career endeavors. They explained that their intentions while being a counseling supervisor and also their confidences as having an effect on their attitudes. The participants also discussed how their attitudes were linked to their maturity and multiculturalism.

The fifth and sixth themes described the emotionality of counseling supervisors as the participants revealed how counseling supervisors' emotionality was structured by feelings and their effects. The participants explained their feelings were an outcome of being triggered and resulted with the counseling supervisor experiencing various sensations. The effect of the triggers and the sensations they elicit have on counseling supervisors was described by the participants in terms of their reactions to the feelings and how they express their emotions.

### **Essence of the Phenomenon**

Six structural themes, each having two textural sub-themes, emerged from the data. By synthesizing the themes and sub-themes a composite description of the phenomenon, or essence, is created. The structural themes: Roles, Competencies, Management Style, Career Endeavors, Feelings, and Effects create the framework of how the participants experience role ambiguity; the textural sub-themes add descriptions about what the participants experience. The *Roles* theme provided the context in which the participants experienced the taking on multiple roles each having their particular

attributes and uses. The *Competency* theme provides the conditions that foster participant competencies. The conditions were described as coming from training and mentorship that counseling supervisors experienced. The *Management Style* theme reveals how the participants style their management of their role. The structure of their style is characterized by the participants' intentions and fueled by their confidences in being a counseling supervisor. Participants' *Career Endeavors* were exposed as situations in which counseling supervisors mature and adopt their sense of multiculturalism. The final themes *Feelings* and *Effects*, portrays the emotional contexts that are filled with emotional triggers and the sensations that ensue. Within this emotional structure is also the emotionally effected reactions and expressions experienced by counseling supervisors. These culminated findings represent the essence of role ambiguity as experienced by counseling supervisors.

### **Summary**

This chapter consisted of a detailed summary of the study's data analysis and findings. The data collection methods and analysis steps were presented followed by the coding procedures. The sections that followed displayed the themes and sub-themes narrated by the participants' responses in order to provide a synthesized description of the structural and textural elements. The combination of the themes and sub-themes illuminated the essence of role ambiguity as perceived and experienced by counseling supervisors.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **DISCUSSION**

#### **Introduction**

This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to discover the essence of role ambiguity experienced by counseling supervisors. To capture the essence of the role ambiguity phenomenon I explored and examined participants' voices regarding what their experiences are and how they experience role ambiguity. Seven counseling supervisors participated in two rounds of interviews and also submitted relevant documents for review. After the collection process, I immersed myself in the coding and analyzing of the data. I also solicited feedback from the participants regarding my findings utilizing member checking during the course of the study to assure conformability; the findings were presented in the previous chapter. In this chapter, I will briefly reiterate the purpose of this study and review the methodology I used to collect and analyze the data.

A summary of the findings that answer this study's research questions will follow and then be compared to existing literature. Next, I will present the possible limitations of this study as well as discuss results in terms of their implications for counseling supervisor educators and practicing counselor supervisors. Finally, I will outline suggestions for future research instigated by the results and findings from this inquiry and conclude the study.

#### **Review of the Purpose of this Study and the Methodology**

The purpose of this phenomenological inquiry was to explore the attitudes, meanings, and perceptions counseling supervisors have of their experiences with role

ambiguity. The two general questions that guided this study were: “What are counseling supervisors’ experiences with role ambiguity?” and, “How do counseling supervisors experience role ambiguity?” To answer these questions I followed Moustakas’ (1994) steps of data analysis that led me to construct textural and structural descriptions of the studied phenomenon from the emergent themes. Through rigorous methods of in-depth interviewing and data analysis, I was able to provide a synthesized depiction of the essence of role ambiguity counseling supervisors experience for a fuller understanding of the phenomenon.

Because this study was to explore counseling supervisors’ experiences with role ambiguity it was necessary that all the participants had experience with the phenomenon. I used criterion sampling to identify individuals who were state licensed counselors, had graduate degrees from CACREP accredited institutions, and who had at least two years experience as a counselor supervisor. Once approval was received from the Human Subjects Review Committee of the Darden College of Education at Old Dominion University, data collection commenced by recruiting seven consenting individuals to participate. The seven participants reside in states on the Pacific Coast, in the Mid-West, and on the East Coast.

I maintained communication with the participants via phone, email, and text-message. The two rounds of interviews were conducted in person, by phone, and Skype. The interviews were semi-structured by open-ended questions as well as ad hoc questions and prompts in order to solicit in-depth participant’ narrations of their lived experiences with the phenomenon of role ambiguity.

Documents relevant to the participants' practice of counseling supervision were also solicited in order to gather and triangulate data from multiple sources. All of the recorded interviews were transcribed by a paid transcriptionist and verified for accuracy by the primary researcher. Member checking was also used throughout the process along with peer debriefing to confirm trustworthiness and validity of my bracketing of biases and assumptions. Once the data was collected and analyzed, I wrote individual summaries depicting the participants' demographics, identified the themes and subthemes that emerged from the analysis, and composed a composite description of the essence of role ambiguity as it was experienced by the participating counseling supervisors.

### **Comparison to Existing Literature**

An abundant number of research studies have been published on the effects role ambiguity has within the supervisory relationship, however most have utilized quantitative methodologies (Brunetto, Farr-Wharton, & Shacklock, 2011; Campbell, & Lingard, 2007; Culbreth, Scarborough, Banks-Johnson, & Solomon, 2005; Itzhaky, 2001; Spafford, Schryer, & Kemery, 2006). Of the few qualitative studies that are published, none have sought to give voice to counseling supervisors regarding their essential experiences with role ambiguity. Returning to the reviewed literature with what I found, several of the themes and sub-themes that emerged from this qualitative phenomenological study referred to the research studies and journal articles on the phenomenon of role ambiguity that I had previously reviewed. In the following section, I will give an account of the relevant themes and subthemes compared to and contrasted with the literature.

### **Theme 1: Roles**



The first major theme includes the parts that structure the counseling supervisors' identity. As in the literature on the composition of the counseling supervisor role (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004), participants in this study all recognized their identity being made up by the pillar roles of counselor, educator, and evaluator. Milene (2009) emphasized the incorporation of these "obligatory "components reinforcing the ACA Code of Ethics' (2005) mandate for counseling supervisors to teach, counsel, and evaluate for the protection, growth, and development of the client, profession, and practitioner.

Even though the ethical codes command counseling supervisors to take on these roles, all of the participants spoke of their necessity and value; most of whom welcomed their usefulness. Falendar and Cornish (2004) and others empirically highlight teaching, supporting, and evaluating as, "Skills intrinsic to supervision (p.779)." Researchers Morgan and Sprenkle (2007) wrote that researchers often describe what supervisors *do* through the use of role-labels. All of the participants not necessarily opposed this view, but spoke of ancillary roles as well not often found in the literature such as advisor, mentor, collaborator, coach, and consultant. . It should not be assumed, according to Westergaard (2013), that supervisors would necessarily, "Relish taking on the additional responsibilities that being a supervisor demands" (p.174).

## **Theme 2: Competencies**

The second major theme describes the situations that counseling supervisors have been in that are foundational for structuring their professional identity. More than a century ago with the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society a shift was made from relating in informal ways brought about through happenstance, to training structures and mentoring

systems. The participants in this study, all being licensed counselors, insinuated their agreement with Cormier and Bernard (1982), Newman (1981), and Upchurch (1985) who all spoke about counseling supervisors own competencies with their ingredient roles that made up their counseling supervisor identity. Whether it was in a scholastic setting or in seminars and conferences, all the participants spoke of the necessity of having supervisor training.

White and Queener (2003) through their research found that the supervisor knows that *the relationship* in supervision is a root force in terms of the effectiveness of supervision. The participants all spoke of their past experiences with being mentored from elder supervisors. Most of their experiences occurred before the ACES Best Practices (2011) document was published which stated that, “The supervisor demonstrates professionalism in an effort to encourage the supervisee to exhibit similar behavior” (p.14). This was a critical factor that explained a lot of the participants’ grief over their experiences with poor supervision.

Commiserating with Nelson and Friedlander’s (2001) finding that satisfactory supervisory experience occurs when conflicts are well managed and successfully resolved, the participants explained that they learned the most from and modeled after their mentors who established rapport and an environment for safe exploration of issues and modeled *what not to do* from those mentors who were, as one participant described, *sterile*, and having a limited range of skills and approaches. This contrasted with some of the literature however, specifically Westefeld (2006), who explained that *most* supervisors were trained by counseling psychologists and educators who were, “Often humanists who historically have had a hard time providing direct negative feedback”

(p.302). Some of the participants alluded to their experience with receiving supervision from *mentors* who had no problem sharing their negative and authoritative views.

### **Theme 3: Management Style**

The third major theme includes the conditions that guide counseling supervisors' management style. Edwards (2013) concluded that supervisors leaned on their counseling skills to help establish and maintain an effective supervisory relationship; the participants in this study agreed. The participants however only *leaned*; they were cautious about taking on a strong counseling approach. Even though most of the participants were proud of their proficiency in the art of counseling, it brought on challenges.

These challenges were the reason that the participants' intentions and confidences contrasted with O'Donovan, Halford, and Walters (2011) who believed that the counselor identity is *apt* for maintaining a supervisory alliance. Some participants shared experiences receiving feedback from supervisees who reported their supervision seemed too *touchy feely* or *too much like counseling*. Knight (2012) suggested that one of the most unhelpful behaviors that a supervisor can engage in is, "Disclosing or requiring the supervisee to self-disclose information that is too personal in nature" which can, "move the supervisory relationship into a therapeutic one" (p. 15).

Other participants in the study described times when they realized they were too *subjective* and *over empathized* which goes along with Westefeld's (2006) statement, "Critiquing people effectively is a real challenge" (p. 302). Lemberger and Dollaride (2006) said that supervisors, "Forge an environment of trust, openness, and productivity" (p.114). The participants in this study shared the same intentions. The participants did not

hesitate, also stating that their intentions became clear when dealing with ethical and legal matters that paralleled Westefeld's (2008) study.

#### **Theme 4: Career Endeavors**

The fourth major theme includes the factors from counseling supervisors' career endeavors that structure their experiences with role ambiguity. According to the ACES website, the ACES Standards (1995) publication is said to be a *historical document*. The standards state that supervisors are expected to possess personal and professional maturity and despite the document being archived, it recently compared to the participants' responses in this current study. One participant, Geordi, proclaimed that experience holds the greatest value and another participant practices and preaches his belief that counseling supervisors need to try to deal with ambiguity *as maturely and wisely as possible*. All of the participants advocated for career longevity to constantly grow in their roles and become seasoned.

The participants' responses regarding multiculturalism contrasted with the conclusions of one scholar. Yurtserver (2001) stated that supervisors were *ambiguity intolerant*, and thus had a low endorsement for diversity. The participants, no matter their place on the maturity spectrum, all spoke of their endeavors being focused on empowerment, equality, and the benefits of multiculturalism. All of the participants admitted to not knowing *everything* and benefited from what Young, Lambie, Hutchinson, and Thurston-Dyer (2011) called *active inquiry*. By modeling active inquiry supervisors communicate an acceptance of imperfection, of self, and of individuality (p. 7).

#### **Theme 5: Feelings**

The fifth major theme includes the conditions that structure counseling supervisors' emotionality. Even though their feelings vary, the participants were all in agreement with the literature, which calls supervision a *complex situation*, in which there are a *great number of cues*, or triggers, for the supervisor to take into account (Adobor, 2006). All of the participants mirrored Fall and Sutton's (2004) findings that put forth the notion that supervisors are triggered by the call to conduct an evaluation eliciting sensations of anxiety. The participants all agreed that when there are situations in which there is a potential for harm it is clear which actions to take.

The participants both compared and contrasted with the literature when triggered by situations that are ambiguous. Four of the participants' responses paralleled research studies by McLain (2009) as well as Korinek and Kimball (2003) whose results concluded that counseling supervisors when triggered by ambiguous situations experience sensations of discomfort, worry, and stress. The other half of the participants disagreed however, when they indicated that ambiguity led them to feelings of dissonance, excitement, and courageousness. Although divided in their comparison to some of the reviewed literature, the participants unanimously contradicted Dugas, Gosselin, and Ladouceur (2001) who reported that supervisors triggered by role ambiguity sense feelings of panic; none of the participants mentioned having had feelings of panic while experiencing role ambiguity.

#### **Theme 6: Effects**

The sixth and last major theme describes how effects of emotions are a factor that provided structure to the feelings counseling supervisors experience. Cheon, Blumer, Shih, Murphy, and Sato's (2009) notion that supervisors negotiate and deal with conflict

in different ways holds true for the participants in this study. One participant's reactions aligned with Wittenberg and Norcross (2001) whose study revealed that supervisors expressed low levels of enjoyment when having to assume the supervisory role because of the potential of experiencing role ambiguity that comes with that position.

Agreeing with Wittenberg and Norcross (2001), the participant said she becomes angry and feels *defeated* because she pairs being affected by role ambiguity with her failing to meet her self-initiated goal for perfectionism. That participant's views however, along with the others, contrasted with DeRoma, Martin, and Kessler's (2003) article that stated that an effect of role ambiguity is supervisor's reactions being to provide narrow solutions rather than considering possibilities. All of the participants expressed having had feelings of uncertainty with their supervisees and either reacted to those feelings by collaborating with the supervisee or by seeking out consultation from their own supervisors.

This backed up Ellis' (2010) suggestion in his study that supervisors should not avoid fears and anxieties; should instead confront those issues through self-reflection and through dialogue. According to Spafford et al. (2007), supervisors who accepted ambiguity consciously tried to create an environment of safety and exploration to manage their own uncertainty. The participants also all reacted to the effects of role ambiguity by expressing their desire for safety, however their statements contrasted with the literature in that they did not all accept ambiguity. Some tolerated it and some accepted it.

### **Limitations**

Being relatively inexperienced at being a qualitative researcher heightened the probability of this study having limitations. Other possible limitations of this study

include my own personal biases' influence, the participant selection, and my use of a professional transcriptionist. I made attempts however to circumvent these limiting factors in the study.

### **Researcher Lack of Experience**

Even though I completed doctoral level qualitative and research design coursework, my lack of relative experience may have been a factor that resulted in me missing opportunities to ask probing questions during the individual interviews. To mitigate this from affecting my data collection, I designed my collection procedures to include two rounds of interviews; an initial interview and a follow up interview. This allowed me to have the initial interviews returned to me from the transcriptionist so I could read through them several times, looking for open-ended questions, encouragers, or lack thereof, before conducting the second round of interviews. I also implemented the use of member checking to verify my findings.

### **Researcher's Bias**

Indicative of qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for data collection. Therefore, it was necessary and crucial that I be aware of my own biases throughout all of the processes of this study. Before beginning my research, I stated the risks and possible implications of my biased subjectivity and planned ways to reduce their influence on the study, data collection, and analysis. I kept a reflective journal to record my thoughts and feelings, consulted with a peer debriefer, and utilized member checking to verify the accuracy of the transcripts and confirm emerging themes and patterns to ensure that I was not misrepresenting the participants' perceptions. I made

frequent contact with my peer debriefer so that he could point out any indications of my biases swaying the study that I might have been unaware of.

### **Participant Selection and Modes of Data Collection**

The sample size of this study compared to larger-scale studies was limited with having seven participants who were counseling supervisors. Along with amassing a higher quantity of participants and broadening the geographic scope of the search, it's recommended that the modes of data collection be homogenous. In this study document collection and communication (other than the interviews) with the participants was the same. The interviews varied in how they were conducted, namely Skype, face-to-face, and telephone.

The contexts of the interviews each had their benefits and limitations most of which are similar and have been identified through research. There were clear differences between the three mediums however unconscious biases and unique nuances specific to each mode were unaccounted for and may have hindered the full receipt of participant expressions regarding their lived experiences with role ambiguity.

I limited my participant group by selecting counseling supervisors who had at least two years experienced, had a state-counseling license, and held at least a masters degrees from a CACREP accredited university or college. I attempted to select participants based on criteria related to their credentials so that the demographic diversity of my participants was unintentional and random.

Making up the group were three men and four women located broadly across the United States. There was one African American woman, one woman indicating that she was Asian American, and the rest were Caucasian men and women. They were all



gainfully employed and they all had ease of access to resources such as telephone, email, Skype. These limitations related to the participants' characteristics might limit the transferability of this study's findings.

### **Use of Professional Transcriptionist**

Two digital recording devices were operated so that two files of the same interview could be used to prevent loss of data due to unclear recordings. Because the interviews were recorded the responses needed to be typed for analysis purposes. I utilized a professional transcriptionist for that purpose, and with doing so I took steps to reduce the limitations that outsourcing the job of transcribing can bring.

One of the fundamental limitations of using a transcriptionist in this study was that the transcriptionist was not present at the interviews. A possible effect of using a transcriptionist was that it prevented me, the researcher, from fully immersing myself in the data. A consequence of the transcriptionist not being present was that she had to rely solely on interpreting the audio recordings (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Her not being present also may have invited issues related to the confidential transferring of data between the transcriptionist and myself.

Along with signing a confidentiality agreement I discussed my expectations and the parameters of our collaboration. I worked closely with the transcriptionist to ensure that the produced documented-interviews were accurate and comprehensive. My discussions with the transcriptionist were in response to research on qualitative methods' that reported that transcriptionists might misinterpret a participant's comments or use incorrect punctuation that would change the tone or meaning of a comment (Bucholtz, 2000).

Before the maiden interview, I discussed formatting issues with the transcriptionist. I clarified questions regarding punctuation, reassured the transcriptionist that it was okay to not ‘clean up’ the dialogue (which was her professional habit to do so), and requested utterances, pauses, and audible non-verbals to be typed along with the conversation. I also reviewed the transcripts immediately after receipt.

### **Implications**

#### **Counseling Supervisor Educators**

ACES’ Best Practices (2011) encourage supervisors to be open to role ambiguity however all of the participants in this study admitted to not ever hearing or learning about the phenomenon while in their masters and doctoral programs. Moberg (2005) encouraged the recognition of role ambiguity and promoted its legitimacy as part of the learning process. This study’s findings reinforce and promote ethical practice. According to the ACA Code of Ethics (2005), educators, while teaching the development of skills in *new specialty areas*, such as managing the phenomenon of role ambiguity, should take steps to *ensure* competent work and protection of *others from possible harm*.

This study’s results can better assist counseling supervisor educators when they are instructing supervisors-in-training who want to learn the art, science, and practice of counseling supervision. The ACA Code of Ethics (2005) states that supervisors are required to maintain role clarity and explain their expectations and responsibilities associated with each role. The findings in this study further illuminate the high potential for inadvertent unethical practices by supervisors who have a negative reaction to role ambiguity.

Nelson et al. (2010) found that executing an appropriate balance of roles for the unique needs of each supervisee can be difficult. The results of this study can assist educators with their attempt at teaching a complex art form. The results presented in this study also provide in-depth narratives that can add to the literacy of educators to enhance the content of their instruction. The participants join Schlesinger (2003) in promoting positive regard for role ambiguity, which can be offered in classroom lectures.

### **Practicing Counselor Supervisors**

Counseling Supervisors who follow the ACA Code of Ethics (2005) are instructed to work to minimize potential conflicts that occur within the supervisory relationship. Clegg (2010), just as the participants in this study did, acknowledged the permanence of role ambiguity in supervision. This study's findings have implications for counseling supervisors who do not understand the phenomenon. McLain (2009) explained that lack of information either by knowledge or experience may lead to supervisors feeling stressed or anxious. This study increases the amount of information that supervisors can reference to assist supervisors acknowledge the phenomenon and promote dialogue about it.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

The findings from this qualitative phenomenological study indicate that counseling supervisors have various and similar perceptions, attitudes, and emotions in relation to the phenomenon of role ambiguity. Participants described having negative and positive attitudes regarding the multiple roles that make up their role of counseling supervisor. All of the participants also added other roles not heavily mentioned in the literature such as collaborator, coach, advisor, and consultant.

They spoke of the benefits from trudging through the impasse of ambiguity as it leads to personal and professional growth and overall wellbeing. They reported having a mix of feelings such as nervousness, intrigue, anxiety, fear, excitement, and peacefulness when experiencing role ambiguity. It is notable that they all attributed the shaping of their professional role to past experiences personal, academic, and professional in nature. The findings from this qualitative phenomenological study has added new information in the way of giving voice to participants and their in-depth descriptions of their personal experiences with role ambiguity.

Future research on the phenomenon of role ambiguity experienced by counseling supervisors is needed. Future research designed by both quantitative and qualitative methodologies can begin by expanding this study by including a wider sample of practicing counseling supervisors from various locales in the United States. Increasing the accumulation of relevant documents is encouraged as well.

Additional research would benefit from focusing its samples according to career maturity levels to raise awareness about effective education and practices that more appropriately correspond to counseling supervisors' developmental process. Researchers in the future, along with their audiences, may benefit from an increased understanding of how role ambiguity is experienced with practitioners who have differing degrees of alignment with counseling, education, and evaluation. And research on the effects of educators' role modeling toleration of ambiguity in graduate and doctorate level instruction is also recommended.

This study's findings can inform future research on counselor educators, counseling supervisor educators, and current counseling supervisors. Currently, there are

few studies in the literature related to this topic therefore the findings of this study may be considered *innovative*. The ACA Code of Ethics (2005) defines themes that are, “Innovative, without an empirical foundation, or without a well-grounded theoretical foundation” as “unproven” or “developing” (F.6.f.). Further research could expand the inclusion of more diverse sampling of professional counseling supervisors and also utilize both qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

By using what was reported by the participants in this study as an empirical base, surveys to determine how prevalent the participant’s experiences are in the grander population of counseling supervisors may be developed. The findings of this study might also be used to further transform in-depth interview protocols as well as be used to better equip researchers as they gain entry into the field. Lastly, the themes that emerged from the data analysis might determine variables to assess for in experimental designed studies.

### **Conclusion**

This study sought to synthesize the essence of role ambiguity from a counseling supervisor’s perspective. I attempted to capture the voices of counseling supervisors who are directly affected by role ambiguity by analyzing data collected from in-depth interviews with counseling supervisors regarding their experiences and perceptions with the phenomenon. I used the results from the analyzed data to answer the research questions: “What are counseling supervisors’ experiences with role ambiguity?” and, “How do counseling supervisors experience role ambiguity?”

I used a qualitative phenomenological methodology to examine counseling supervisors’ experiences with role ambiguity while engaged in the supervisory

relationship. A brief overview of the purpose of the study and the methodology was provided in this chapter. I then made comparisons of the six major themes that emerged in this study with the existing literature. Then, following a listing of possible limitations, I discussed the implications the findings of this study have for counseling supervisor educators and practicing counseling supervisors. Finally, suggestions for future research were given.

The findings in this study support continued research and training in the art of supervision. Through giving voice to the participants' lived experiences with role ambiguity, the findings of this qualitative phenomenological study has added new real-life stories about the conditions and situations in which counseling supervisors experience role ambiguity as well as a description of how counseling supervisors experience the typical and distinctive character of this complex phenomenon. This study and its results, serve as a foundation for future studies that aim at researching the relationship counseling supervisors have with role ambiguity. This essence consists of complex perceptions, attitudes, and feelings that come with being a counseling supervisor. The results may help inform those who are concerned with improving and enhancing counseling supervisor education and practice.

I began this study with a verse from The Mishnah and I will end this chapter and conclude this study with another passage from *Pirkei Avot*, (The Ethics of our Fathers).

Verse four states:

Hillel would say: Do not separate yourself from the community. Do not believe in yourself until the day you die. Do not judge your fellow until you have stood in his place. Do not say something that is not readily understood in the belief that it will ultimately be understood [or: Do not say something that ought not to be heard even in the strictest confidence, for ultimately it will be heard]. And do not say "When I free myself of my concerns, I will study," for perhaps you will never free yourself.

**CHAPTER SIX**  
**MANUSCRIPT SUBMISSION**

Role Ambiguity of Counseling Supervisors

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### **Abstract**

Supervisors often find themselves in the midst of ambiguity seeking clarity of their role and professional identity within the counseling field. Supervisors wear many hats, the most prominent ones being educator, counselor, and gatekeeper for the profession. Counseling supervisors are expected to establish and maintain a complex blend of professional, educational, and therapeutic relationships with their supervisees. This process involving multiple roles often presents conflicts. One such conflict experienced by supervisors has been termed *role ambiguity*. The purpose of this phenomenological inquiry was to explore what experiences counseling supervisors have with role ambiguity and how they experience role ambiguity. Themes emerged from the data related to the perceptions counseling supervisors have about their identity, attitudes regarding the clarity and ambiguity of their roles, and their emotionality while experiencing role ambiguity.

**KEYWORDS:** counselor supervisor, role ambiguity, phenomenology



## Introduction

Taken from the Hebrew word *tora*, meaning teaching or instruction, the Torah is the overall body of Jewish teachings that encompasses Jewish law, practice, and tradition. The Five Books of Moses (also referred to as The Bible or The Old Testament) makes up the *Written Torah* however there is also a component said to be the *Oral Torah*, which is a commentary on the Written Torah. As its name implies the Oral Torah was said to be transmitted verbally from teacher to student for many generations until approximately 200 C.E. (common era) when Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi authored the first compilation of the oral law called the *Mishnah* ([www.chabad.org](http://www.chabad.org)).

The Mishnah consists of 63 volumes. One of these volumes, called in Hebrew, *Pirkei Avot*, is devoted to ethical teachings. *Pirkei Avot* is translated in English as, *The Ethics of our Fathers*, and is divided into six chapters (Kravitz & Olitzky, 1993). It was a passage in Chapter five that sparked my interest in the phenomena of role ambiguity and counseling supervision. Verse seven states:

Seven things distinguish a fool and seven things distinguish a wise person. The wise person does not speak in the presence of one who is wiser. The wise person does not interrupt when another is speaking. The wise person is not in a hurry to answer. The wise person asks according to the subject and answers according to the Law. The wise person speaks about the first matter first and the last matter last. If there is something the wise person has not heard [and therefore does not know], the wise person says, "I have never heard [of it]." The wise person acknowledges what is true. The opposite of all these qualities is found in a fool. (p. 80)

It is these seven traits of a wise person and fool that subsequently became the stimulus of my research study (the primary researcher for this project was Aaron G. Shames). For the past seven years I have been living in the Ghent neighborhood of Norfolk, VA. The private practice where I work as a psychotherapist is a short distance from my home and Old Dominion University, where I am a doctoral student earning a

degree in counseling, is nearby as well. Being Jewish I consider myself fortunate to be in walking distance to three synagogues, one of which I am a member. There is also a Chabad House where I attend religious classes and meet with Rabbis for Halakic consultation.

Chabad is a Hebrew acronym for the three intellectual faculties of a Jew- *chochmah* (wisdom), *binah* (comprehension), and *da'at* (knowledge; [www.chabad.org](http://www.chabad.org)). About three years ago my secular learning and Halakic learning ran into each other and I became anxious. The first time I took on the supervisor role I experienced an uncomfortable shock. The anxiety came from my unexplained inability to easily resolve my internal conflict when deciding to verbalize my knowing and also not knowing. I had never before been conflicted by hesitation with acknowledging the truth no matter if it was expressing my confidences or ignorance in my professional roles and I certainly did not want the supervisee to perceive me as a fool; I wanted to be seen as a model for professional counseling and supervision.

This journal exists for many mental health professionals who provide supervision within their practices. This particular study utilized participants who are professional counselors. As a result, the professional counseling literature, accreditation agencies, and code of ethics are cited. Since supervision practices within the mental health professions are similar, the findings from this study are meaningful for all supervisors.

I had been a licensed professional counselor in the field for several years and considered myself wise in the ways of establishing and maintaining a therapeutic relationship. I became wise in the tenets of effective education by taking classes in learning modalities and class facilitation and had experience in their practice, and I was

wise to the function and performance of evaluation. Coming from a stance of not knowing has helped me join with others to enter a forum where exploration, revelation, and collaboration are promoted and safe to thrive. I knew myself as someone who does not interrupt or deny my client's or student's expression of thoughts and feelings, I do not hurry with my questioning and answering as to minimize the risk of haste in decision making that leads to unethical practice, and my credentials provide me an order for my attending behaviors: the first matter being client welfare and enhancement of the quality of life in society; the second is promoting the development of professional counselors; the third is advancing the counseling profession; and then lastly is to speak for and promote respect for human dignity and diversity (ACA Code of Ethics, 2005).

I had completed the required coursework in counseling supervision and counselor education and as part of my doctoral degree requirements I took on the role of clinical supervisor to master's-level counseling students. I had knowledge of the goals of supervision as well as the program policies and procedures. I knew that as clinical supervisor I was to facilitate a relationship made from professional, educational, and therapeutic components. Supervisees are counselors-in-training meeting with me to learn or strengthen their own counseling skills, become exposed to the counseling profession and its consumers, and have their efforts evaluated for ensuring their practice is in accordance with ethical standards and competently delivered. I thought I had comprehended what it was to be a counselor supervisor, or had I?

With this qualitative study I attempted to capture the voices of the counseling supervisors who are directly affected by role ambiguity, become distracted with the conflicting roles within the supervisory role, and struggle to find a resolution due to not

having a full understanding of the very phenomenon that encounters them. By engaging in an in-depth examination of several counseling supervisor experiences with role ambiguity I sought to reveal the essence of the phenomenon. The results may help inform a collective and accepted awareness of role ambiguity as counseling supervisors experience it. This study may also serve as a foundation for future studies that aim at researching the impact and effectiveness of supervisor education and training, counseling supervisory practices, and ethical practice.

### **Context for the Study**

In the concluding chapter of the *Handbook of Counselor Preparation* (published in cooperation with the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision), the authors discuss *internal obstacles* of the counselor educator (McAuliffe & Eriksen, 2011). These internal obstacles are a testament to the progression of the counseling profession and its subsequent educators and practitioners who are constantly evolving, creating, and adopting standards of practice. Supervisors especially find themselves in the midst of ambiguity seeking clarity of their role within the growing profession. Supervisors wear many hats, the most prominent ones being educator, counselor, and gatekeeper for the counseling profession. Because there is yet to be an unwavering universal code of ethics and global standards of practice in the counseling profession that encompass all cultures served, research continues the effort of offering hope to the conflicted and therefore less effective counseling supervisor.

Goodyear and Bernard (1998) referenced literature related to the practice of mental health supervision, which dates back more than 120 years. In the late 1800s, supervision was an aspect of social work exemplified by the Charity Organization

Society (COS) that sustained positions for staff members who supervised apprentice workers (Munson, 2002). The COS existed as its own entity from 1883 to 1893 when the Central Relief Association, later known as the Bureau of Organized Charities, absorbed it.

A few years later in 1902, Sigmund Freud emerged from his self-proclaimed era of self-analysis. Upon coming out of his *glorious heroic age* and *splendid isolation* (Freud, 1914) a number of young doctors loitered around him with the explicit intention of learning, practicing, and spreading the knowledge of psychoanalysis. The collaborative was made up by analysts such as Alfred Adler, Sandor Ferenczi, Carl Jung, and Ernest Jones who along with Freud came to be known as the founding members of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society. It was at this point that supervision transitioned from an informal apprenticeship to a training structure.

Psychoanalysis is famous for being a pioneer to other therapies as well as for setting the precedent for addressing supervision from its inception (Bernard & Goodyear, 1998). According to Buckley et al. (1982) supervision was an integral part of the duties assumed by the members of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society that complemented the theoretical teachings and noted analysis of the members themselves. Addressing and incorporating these three elements (supervision, teaching, and personal analysis) in the training process was then adopted as a formal requirement of the International Training Commission in 1925 (Kugler, 1995).

From the 1920s to the mid-1960s psychoanalytic conception of clinical supervision and supervisory theory evolved. Leddick and Bernard (1980) identified the adoption of facilitative theory, behavioral theory, and skills training as phases in the

development of clinical supervision. Along with the increased attention to research, counseling supervision has continued to be identified and developed as a separate specialty within the counseling profession (Dye & Borders, 1990).

With collaboration and credentials of the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision and American Counseling Association, a cooperative accreditation effort came to fruition in 1981 with the establishment of the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). Research on goals, functions, and methods in clinical supervision has helped the delivery of clinical supervision stand out as one of the central standards of CACREP. From CACREP's inception, writers have made unyielding calls for systematic training in clinical supervision for supervisors. Writers such as Cormier and Bernard (1982), Newman (1981), and Upchurch (1985) have spoken to the necessity of supervisor training claiming that the past assumption that good counselors automatically made good supervisors was unethical. They took the position that untrained supervisors were practicing outside of their area of competence (Borders, Bernard, Dye, Fong, Henderson, & Nance, 1991).

Though clinical supervision has roots stemming from roughly more than a century ago, supervision remains relatively new as a specific domain of inquiry. It continues to develop its solid conceptual and empirical foundation. Just recently a definition of supervision, penned by Goodyear and Bernard (2004), has come to be accepted within the counseling profession that delineates the three broad roles of clinical supervisors:

Supervision is an intervention that is provided by a more senior member of a profession to a more junior member or members of that same profession. This relationship is evaluative, extends over time, and has the simultaneous purposes of enhancing the professional functioning of the more junior person(s), monitoring the quality of professional services offered to the clients she, he, or they see(s), and serving as a gatekeeper of those who are to enter the particular profession. (p. 8)

Supervisors adopt the responsibilities for development of the supervisees, the treatment of the supervisees' clients, and protection of the public from incompetent practitioners (Bernard & Goodyear 2004; Bradley & Ladany 2001; Falvey, 2002). The definition of supervision specifically delineates the multiple roles that clinical supervisors assume. These might be termed teacher, evaluator, counselor, model, mentor, and advisor. A review of the literature pertaining to counseling supervision revealed that being a clinical supervisor requires counselors to assume these several roles within the counseling profession. Independently each role has its own rules, regulations, standards, guidelines, and intentionality.

Supervisory relationships are a complex blend of professional, educational, and therapeutic relationships. This complex process can become increasingly complicated when supervisors are involved in multiple roles with trainees. Combining the roles of supervising, counseling, and educating often presents conflicts (Corey & Herlihy, 1996c; Pope & Vasquez, 1998; Whiston & Emerson, 1989). One such conflict experienced by supervisors has been termed *role ambiguity*.

According to Mangione, Mears, Vincent, and Hawes (2011) there is a lack of *deeply engaging* questioning of relationship, power, status, and roles, *unless there is a conflict*. It is notable that researchers have attempted to engage in conflict resolution by putting forth scales assessing for tolerance of ambiguity, reports on the effects and cautions from ambiguity, and suggestions about how to address this ambiguity. However, a gap existed in describing the essence of role ambiguity as experienced by counseling supervisors. Most studies about role ambiguity have utilized a quantitative methodology yielding data by way of pre-test and post-test formats and assessments (Brunetto, Farr-

Wharton, & Shacklock, 2011; Campbell, & Lingard, 2007; Culbreth, Scarborough, Banks-Johnson, & Solomon, 2005; Itzhaky, 2001; Spafford, Schryer, & Kemery, 2006). The quantitative results from these studies conclude with only peripheral descriptions of role ambiguity.

Specific to the field of supervision, even when using qualitative methods, results were derived from the receiver of supervision and not from the supervisors themselves. In order to investigate the phenomenon of role ambiguity I utilized a qualitative phenomenological methodology. The focus of this phenomenological inquiry was based on my assumption that the experience of role ambiguity is common among counseling supervisors, and through rigorous methods of in-depth interviewing, I was able to give voice to counselor supervisors' perspectives.

### **Method**

This study was designed to explore counseling supervisors' experiences and perceptions of role ambiguity guided by the research questions:

- What are counseling supervisors' experiences with role ambiguity?
- How do counseling supervisors experience role ambiguity?

Using a qualitative phenomenological methodology, data were collected from participant interviews and shared documents, and then was analyzed. The codes and themes that emerged were used to synthesis a description of the essence of role ambiguity as experienced by counseling supervisors.

### **Participants**

Criterion sampling was used to identify individuals who were state licensed counselors, had graduate degrees from institutions accredited by the Council on



Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), and who had at least two years experience as a counselor supervisor. The seven participants resided in states on the Pacific Coast, in the Mid-West, and on the East Coast. They consisted of practicing counselors and counselor educators all of whom also assumed the role of counseling supervisor.

Participants included four females and three males with five of them identifying themselves as Caucasian or White, one identifying as African American, and one participant identifying as Asian. Ages of the participants ranged from 31 to 63, 46 being the mean. There were five counseling supervisors currently in a university/college, setting one of which also noted concurrently having a private practice affiliation. Two participants were working only in a business/practice setting.

The majority of the participants held degrees in the field of counseling at the doctorate level. Two participants had doctoral degrees in the field of psychology and one participant had a Masters degree in the field of counseling. All of the participants were licensed counselors in the states in which they resided. The years of experience collectively shared in clinical settings was 17 spanning 7 to 33 years. Five of the participants had been in a college or university setting; one of which had the least amount of time being 2 years and another having the most with 22 years of experience in a university or college setting. All seven of the participants noted their number of years in supervisory practice. The mean number of years of experience as a counseling supervisor was 12.5, with a range from 3-20 years.

### **Data Collection**

The respondents who met criteria were sent a consent form to sign to agree to participate in the study. The participants volunteered for an initial 60-90 minute interview and a 30-minute follow-up interview. Participants were also asked to complete a Participant Demographic Information form as well as provide documents such as a resume, curriculum vitae (if available), brochures, or other materials which they typically gave supervisees or students that described their services, disclosure statements, and other relevant documents such as supervision agreement forms and evaluation forms if they used them.

An initial interview was conducted with each of the seven participants. In an email correspondence I reconfirmed the participants' consent to record the interviews and indicated that part of my protocol was to have the digital recorder on at the onset of the interview. Immediately after the initial pleasantries with the participants I verbally acknowledged the conversation being recorded and asked once more for consent. Following the initial casual remarks and consent to record I began to engage with the participant following the interview protocol.

Interview questions from the protocol included: (a) How did you first hear about counseling supervision? (b) What were your initial impressions of the role of the counseling supervisor? (c) How did you become interested in becoming a counseling supervisor? (d) Tell me about your experiences and perceptions with role ambiguity when providing counseling supervision, (e) What are your thoughts about Bernard's notion that counseling supervisors sometimes take on the roles of counselor, educator, and evaluator? (f) Please tell me if you believe that these roles are clear or ambiguous and how you relate to them as a counseling supervisor, (g) What are your feelings about the

appropriateness of these roles being the makeup for the counseling supervisor role? (h)

What place do these roles have within the counseling supervisory relationship?

In addition to asking these questions during the interviews, I also actively listened and responded to the participants intently in order to understand and elicit personal and detailed explanations of their experiences with the phenomenon. I utilized prompts, probes, and follow-up questions to gain clarity and a fuller understanding of their responses. I took handwritten notes during the interviews as well recording my observations and personal thoughts. The follow-up interviews followed the same procedures as the initial interviews however the protocol was modified to focus on gaining more in-depth knowledge and insight about the emerging themes and concepts revealed during the initial interviews. The follow-up interview was concluded with asking each participant to email documents relevant to their practice of counseling supervision.

### **Data Analysis**

The interviews were digitally recorded and the files were uploaded to a secure drive shared only with my transcriptionist. I had the interviews transcribed to distance the data and myself so that the chance of the interviews influencing one another was decreased. The data, which consisted of documents submitted by the participants, the interview transcriptions, and email correspondence were then printed for analysis purposes. Multiple sources of data were collected for triangulation purposes. The data collection took place over a three-month time frame.

Once the data was collected I simultaneously reviewed the documents and interview transcripts of each participant separately. I began immersing myself in the data

beginning the analysis process first by compiling piles of the raw data. The piles included the interview transcripts, notes, and documents that corresponded to each participant.

Taking one pile at a time I read through the materials all the way through and then again raking through the texts bracketing out as many indicators of my personal experiences and identities as possible. After the second read through I read through the data once more to make sure my bracketing did not leave any residue of my assumptions and biases. Setting aside my own preconceived interpretations, my focus was then directed solely on the voices of the participants in the study.

During the next stage of the analysis process an undetermined amount of time was allocated for searching the data for words, phrases, and other details and coding them. Significant statements were listed and grouped into meaningful clusters according to what emerging themes they related to. I compiled the individual depictions together and using the horizontalization process I reduced the data by eliminating overlapping and repetitive statements leaving essential statements, or horizons, of the collected data. The common statements from the group of individual participants, having assumed equal value, were then constructed into meaningful structural themes and textural sub-themes.

The structural themes were made up of descriptions related to what experiences the participants had with role ambiguity and the related sub-themes were participant narratives regarding how they experienced role ambiguity. These structural themes and textural sub-themes were then synthesized to form an overall portrayal of the essence of role ambiguity from a counseling supervisor's perspective. Member checks were performed throughout the data collection and analysis processes of this study along with frequent contact with a peer debriefer via email, text, and telephone.

## **Findings**

The results of the study are organized into six major themes and interrelated sub-themes. The first major theme, Roles, was supported by the sub-themes: Attribution to Pillar Roles and Ancillary Makeup. Theme two, Competencies, was sustained by the sub-themes: Training and Mentorship. Sub-themes Intentionality and Confidences reinforced the third major theme, Management Style, and the fourth major theme, Career Endeavors, was supported by the sub-themes Maturity and Multiculturalism. Feelings was the fifth major theme and Triggers and Sensations emerged as its sub-themes. The sixth and last major theme, Effects, was supported by the sub-themes Reactions and Expressions.

The first and second themes, Roles and Competencies, revealed the participants' perceptions of their professional identity. The first two themes explained the identity of participants being structured by the roles of counselor, educator, and evaluator and perceived the roles as being pillars of their profession. One participant said, "It sometimes feels like therapy, sometimes it feels like I'm teaching them something, and sometimes it feels like I need to caution them as a gatekeeper." The participants also reported viewing themselves as collaborators, mentors, consultants, coaches, and advocates, which they agreed were axillary roles found outside of the professional counseling field.

The participants discussed their professional identity being made up according to how they perceive their competencies in each role. "There is a lot of freedom in being able to teach but not be a professor; being able to counsel a little bit but not be their [supervisees'] counselor," said one participant. Another explained that, "You can't just be a counselor because you're not their counselor. If you are just the evaluator you might as

well be a paper pusher. If you're just an educator, well, you are talking about just teaching."

They conceptualized their competencies as a result of their trainings and mentorship. The supervisors' trainings ranged from academic, professional, and personal learning experiences. One participant noted, "There was a lot that I learned in the program that I didn't know and that I wasn't doing before either." The participants shared their experiences, both positive and negative, having been mentored along their way to become counseling supervisors. "I think when most of us in the field get started in a supervisory role, we essentially draw from our own experiences and certainly try to retrieve memories about what it was like when we were getting started," said one participant. Another said she hopes that people have good role models so they can get a good idea how supervision is done. "My supervision experiences shaped how I was a supervisor in the future--positive and negative," added one participant.

The third and fourth themes, Management Style and Career Endeavors, showed participants describing the effects of their attitudes on their management style and career endeavors. The participants reported that their management style was structured by their intentionality as well as by their confidences. They explained that their intention while being a counseling supervisor was, as one participant described, "Really to promote the next generation to be there to do the next generation of things," however, "It's not like we shoot from the hip," said another participant further stating, "It's about going into the profession knowing what the roles are and how they're defined; knowing you are coming into this as a scholar, a practitioner, educator, and mentor."

One participant explained that the intentions of being a counseling supervisor is, “Not about expecting them to be perfect or not have issues but it is expecting them to be open to noticing when those issues are coming into play and that means being open to feedback.” Participants spoke about their confidences having an effect on their management style. One participant shared that she goes back to what she is comfortable with and what she thinks she’s good at and that is, “The counselor education piece. Being a counselor supervisor gives me a chance to pull on my experience as a professional counselor and my experience as a counselor educator.” Similarly another participant stated, “I could be a counselor for a personal issue or the personalization piece, or I could be a teacher related to the conceptualization piece. You really have to in your own mind be clear about what role it is you are playing at that moment and have to be flexible just as much. I like that you never really know, but you have the tools in your back pocket.”

The participants also attributed their attitudes about role management coming from their career endeavors, and more specifically stemming from their maturity and multiculturalism. “It’s kinda like an athlete. The experienced ones have the greatest value,” said one participant. “It’s easy to jump through hoops to become a supervisor but you may not have the identity yet. You haven’t developed because you don’t have enough experience to have developed,” said another. The participants all spoke about *going out there*, and as one participant put it, “There is always someone out there who knows more than you do. Not that you have to know everything. There is always something you can learn too.” One participant says to, “Try and deal with it as maturely and wisely as possible, but always imperfectly.”

It was through her career endeavors that one participant came to realize *what we do*. She was referring to getting and being prepared for the diversity that comes with enacting our roles in the counseling profession. “We are talking about people and people aren’t just numbers on a scatter plot, they are people, and you have an obligation and a responsibility to your patient or supervisee to meet their needs and if that means working with them from a different theoretical perspective then that is what you do,” remarked one participant.

The participants all described the way their maturity and multiculturalism was enhanced by their career endeavors. One participant described counseling supervision as, “A process of joint curiosity.” Along the same vein another participant explained, “You don’t have to get what I have found. When I share what I think is an apparent matter and they look at you like, ‘have you lost your mind?’ Or you get the sense that they are not really receiving it, and you have to be okay with that too. It’s out there and it can be revisited in a different way at a different time, and then that person will be ready for it in another moment.”

The fifth and sixth themes, Feelings and Effects, described the emotionality of counseling supervisors as the participants revealed how counseling supervisors’ emotionality was structured by feelings and their Effects. The participants explained their feelings were an outcome of being triggered and resulted with the counseling supervisor experiencing various sensations. One participant eloquently phrased a sentiment shared by all of the participants when she said, “Nobody has the same mood and stance and frame of reference and frame of mind. No supervisee does all of the time so they have life moving in and out all of the time anyway and as we come in with supervision we have to



move with them.” While moving with the supervisees, the participants commented on being triggered by the things they saw, by the places they were in, and also triggered by the things they heard.

Most of the participants referenced *a lot going on* when they assumed the counseling supervisor role. Some participants had their feelings triggered when all three roles were being *excited* and they were, *not quite sure what direction to take and the decision to make in the moment*. Other participants discussed their feelings being triggered by sensing discrepancies or when noticing applications not working. No matter what the trigger, for the most part the participants held the same opinion that the triggered feelings within the supervisory relationship are *almost all difficult*.

One participant expressed, “Being fortunate to not have his worry sense triggered too often.” Other participants described having a sensation of being worried as well. Remarks were also made about feelings of anxiety, fear, and frustration. One participant described the sensations as, “A blend of nervous and scared all in one but also feeling peaceful and a sense of joy.” Another participant used the metaphor, “Having butterflies,” to explain the sensations felt when triggered. The uneasy feelings at times lead to other more welcomed sensations according to the participants. One participant remarked, “When the excitement and nervousness is felt, I also feel a heightened awareness, guard, and vigilance.” Likewise, another participant agreed as he told about having feeling of courageousness and humbleness.

All seven of the participants stated that they are affected by their emotions while they are in the supervisory relationship. The feelings provided conditions that influenced the participants’ reactions and expressions. The sixth and final theme, Effect, illustrated

the effects of emotionality on counseling supervisors. Participant responses included a portrayal of what reactions counseling supervisors have as well as a description of what expressions counseling supervisors make when affected by emotions.

Some of the participants reacted with curiosity by asking questions of themselves and also the supervisees such as: "Is this someone I can figure out something with? What should I report? What should I keep to myself? Is this an issue that maybe needs some gatekeeping? How much of this is my stuff? How much of this is their stuff? Did I miss something? Is there something I should have talked about that was really important?"

One participant described his reactions as *backing up* or *moving forward* because, "You are not doing yourself or your supervisee any service because you are stuck," although he initially reacts by *freezing*. Other participants called the reaction, *gearing up* or *preparing to shift*. The art of any kind of intervention is making it look seamless and not gear driven was how one participant began to explain the effect of emotions on his performance during supervision sessions.

The participant described being affected by his emotions in such a way so that he felt, "Free to share doubts, concerns, and inadequacies." Furthermore, he explained that there are moments when he is being affected by the numerous feelings triggered within the supervision relationship which gets him to, "Stand up and say that I don't know;" that I'm dumb in this moment so to speak." Other participants made similar expressions, "I'm looking to them for feedback."

Most of the participants expressed their feelings to assure themselves and the supervisees that they were not going to be confused or overwhelmed when being affected by emotions. One participant explained that expression of feelings acknowledges the

opportunity to grow and figure it out with the supervisee.” However the participant also made sure to say that it should be, “Very clear with the supervisee that my emotions are not their responsibility; they are not their fault.” One of the participants told of his finding that there is, “Too much in the field now that people are so worried about boundaries, and other things, that it creates a climate of fear for the students, and they don’t have the experience of being held and received in their imperfections.

### **Discussion**

#### **Roles.**

The first major theme includes the parts that structure the counseling supervisors’ identity. As in the literature on the composition of the counseling supervisor role (Bernard & Goodyear, 2004), participants in this study all recognized their identity being made up by the pillar roles of counselor, educator, and evaluator. Milene (2009) emphasized the incorporation of these *obligatory* components reinforcing the ACA Code of Ethics’ (2005) mandate for counseling supervisors to teach, counsel, and evaluate for the protection, growth, and development of the client, profession, and practitioner.

Even though the ethical codes command counseling supervisors to take on these roles, all of the participants spoke of their necessity and value; most welcomed their usefulness. Falendar and Cornish (2004) and others empirically highlight teaching, supporting, and evaluating as, “Skills intrinsic to supervision (p. 779).” Researchers Morgan and Sprenkle (2007) wrote that they and assumingly most other researchers described what supervisors *do* through the use of role-labels. All of the participants not necessarily opposed this view, but spoke of ancillary roles as well not often found in the literature such as advisor, mentor, collaborator, coach, and consultant. It should not be

assumed, according to Westergaard (2013), that supervisors will necessarily, “Relish taking on the additional responsibilities that being a supervisor demands” (p.174).

### **Competencies.**

The second major theme describes the situations that counseling supervisors have been in that are foundational for structuring their professional identity. More than a century ago with the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society a shift was made from relating in informal ways brought about through happenstance, to training structures and mentoring systems. The participants in this study, all being licensed counselors, insinuated their agreement with Cormier and Bernard (1982), Newman (1981), and Upchurch (1985) with speaking about their own competencies with the ingredient roles that make up their counseling supervisor identity. Whether it was in a scholastic setting or in seminars and conferences, all the participants spoke of the necessity of having supervisor training.

White and Queener (2003) through their research found that the supervisor knows that *the relationship* in supervision is a root force in terms of the effectiveness of supervision. The participants all spoke of their past experiences with being mentored from elder supervisors. Most of their experiences occurred before the ACES Best Practices (2011) document was published which stated that, “The supervisor demonstrates professionalism in an effort to encourage the supervisee to exhibit similar behavior” (p. 14). This was a critical factor that explained a lot of the participants’ grief over their experiences with poor supervision.

Commiserating with Nelson and Friedlander’s (2001) finding that satisfactory supervisory experience occurs when conflicts are well managed and successfully resolved, the participants explained that they learned the most from and modeled after

their mentors who established rapport and an environment for safe exploration of issues and modeled *what not to do* from those mentors who were, as one participant described, *sterile*, and having a limited range of skills and approaches. This contrasted with some of the literature however, specifically Westefeld (2006), who explained that *most* supervisors were trained by counseling psychologists and educators who were, “Often humanists who historically have had a hard time providing direct negative feedback” (p. 302). Some of the participants alluded to their experience with receiving supervision from *mentors* who had no problem sharing their negative and authoritative views.

### **Management Style.**

The third major theme includes the conditions that guide counseling supervisors’ management style. Edwards (2013) concluded that supervisors leaned on their counseling skills to help establish and maintain an effective supervisory relationship; the participants in this study agreed. The participants however only *leaned*. Even though most of the participants were proud of their proficiency in the art of counseling, it brought on challenges.

These challenges were the reason that the participants’ intentions and confidences contrasted with O’Donovan, Halford, and Walters (2011) who believed that the counselor identity is *apt* for maintaining a supervisory alliance. Some participants shared experiences receiving feedback from supervisees who reported their supervision seemed too *touchy feely* or *too much like counseling*. Knight (2012) suggested that one of the most unhelpful behaviors that a supervisor can engage in is, “Disclosing or requiring the supervisee to self-disclose information that is too personal in nature” which can, “move the supervisory relationship into a therapeutic one” (p. 15).

Other participants in the study described times when they realized they were too *subjective* and *over empathized* which goes along with Westefeld's (2006) statement, "Critiquing people effectively is a real challenge" (p. 302). Lemberger and Dollaride (2006) said that supervisors, "Forge an environment of trust, openness, and productivity" (p. 114). The participants in this study shared the same intentions. The participants did not hesitate, also stating that their intentions became clear when dealing with ethical and legal matters that paralleled Westefeld's (2006) study.

### **Career Endeavors.**

The fourth major theme includes the factors from counseling supervisors' career endeavors that structure their experiences with role ambiguity. According to the ACES website, the ACES Standards (1995) publication is said to be a *historical document*. The standards state that supervisors are expected to possess personal and professional maturity and despite the document being archived, it recently compared to the participants' responses in this study. One participant proclaimed that experience holds the greatest value and another participant practices and preaches his belief that counseling supervisors need to try to deal with ambiguity *as maturely and wisely as possible*. All of the participants advocated for career longevity to constantly grow in their roles and become seasoned.

The participants' responses regarding multiculturalism contrasted with the conclusions of one scholar. Yurtserver (2001) stated that supervisors were *ambiguity intolerant*, and thus had a low endorsement for diversity. The participants, no matter their place on the maturity spectrum, all spoke of their endeavors being focused on empowerment, equality, and the benefits of multiculturalism. All of the participants

admitted to not knowing *everything* and benefited from what Young, Lambie, Hutchinson, and Thurston-Dyer (2011) called *active inquiry*. By modeling active inquiry supervisors communicate an acceptance of imperfection, of self, and of individuality (p. 7).

### **Feelings.**

The fifth major theme includes the conditions that structure counseling supervisors' emotionality. Even though their feelings vary, the participants were all in agreement with the literature, which calls supervision a *complex situation*, in which there are a *great number of cues*, or triggers, for the supervisor to take into account (Adobor, 2006). All of the participants mirrored Fall and Sutton's (2004) findings that put forth the notion that supervisors are triggered by the call to conduct an evaluation eliciting sensations of anxiety. The participants all agreed that when there are situations in which there is a potential for harm it is clear which actions to take.

The participants both compared and contrasted with the literature when triggered by situations that are ambiguous. About half of the participants' responses paralleled research studies by McLain (2009) as well as Korinek and Kimball (2003) whose results concluded that counseling supervisors when triggered by ambiguous situations experience sensations of discomfort, worry, and stress. The other half of the participants disagreed however, when they indicated that ambiguity led them to feelings of dissonance, excitement, and courageousness. Although divided in their comparison to some of the reviewed literature, the participants unanimously contradicted Dugas, Gosselin, and Ladouceur (2001) who reported that supervisors triggered by role

ambiguity sense feelings of panic; none of the participants mentioned having had feelings of panic while experiencing role ambiguity.

### **Effects.**

The sixth and last major theme describes how effects of emotions are factors that provide structure to the feelings counseling supervisors experience. Cheon, Blumer, Shih, Murphy, and Sato's (2009) notion that supervisors negotiate and deal with conflict in different ways holds true for the participants in this study. One participant's reactions aligned with Wittenberg and Norcross (2001) whose study revealed that supervisors expressed low levels of enjoyment when having to assume the supervisory role because of the potential of experiencing role ambiguity that comes with that position.

Agreeing with Wittenberg and Norcross (2001), the participant said she becomes angry and feels *defeated* because she pairs being affected by role ambiguity with her failing to meet her self-initiated goal for perfectionism. That participant's views however, along with the others, contrasted with DeRoma, Martin, and Kessler's (2003) article that stated that an effect of role ambiguity is supervisor's reactions being to provide narrow solutions rather than considering possibilities. All of the participants expressed having had feelings of uncertainty with their supervisees and either reacted to those feelings by collaborating with the supervisee or by seeking out consultation from their own supervisors.

This backed up Ellis' (2010) suggestion in his study that supervisors should not avoid fears and anxieties; should instead confront those issues through self-reflection and through dialogue. According to Spafford et al. (2007), supervisors who accepted ambiguity consciously tried to create an environment of safety and exploration to manage



their own uncertainty. The participants also all reacted to the effects of role ambiguity by expressing their desire for safety, however their statements contrasted with the literature in that they did not all accept ambiguity. Some tolerated it and some accepted it.

### **Implications**

ACES' Best Practices (2011) encourage supervisors to be open to role ambiguity however all of the participants in this study admitted to not ever hearing or learning about the phenomenon while in their masters and doctoral programs. Moberg (2005) encouraged the recognition of role ambiguity and promoted its legitimacy as part of the learning process. According to the ACA Code of Ethics (2005), educators, while teaching the development of skills in *new specialty areas* such as managing the phenomenon of role ambiguity, should take steps to *ensure* competent work and protection from possible harm.

This study's results can inform counseling supervisor educators about the essence of role ambiguity to better inform their teaching of supervisors-in-training. The ACA Code of Ethics (2005) states that supervisors are required to maintain role clarity and explain their expectations and responsibilities associated with each role. The findings in this study further illuminate the high potential for inadvertent unethical practices by supervisors who have a negative reaction to role ambiguity.

Nelson et al. (2010) found that executing an appropriate balance of roles for the unique needs of each supervisee can be difficult. The results of this study can assist educators with their attempt at teaching a complex art form. The results presented in this study also provide in-depth narratives that can add to the literacy of educators to enhance

the content of their instruction. The participants join Schlesinger (2003) in promoting positive regard for role ambiguity, which can be offered in classroom lectures.

Counseling Supervisors who follow the ACA Code of Ethics (2005) are instructed to work to minimize potential conflicts that occur within the supervisory relationship. Clegg (2010), just as the participants in this study did, acknowledged the permanence of role ambiguity in supervision. This study's findings have implications for counseling supervisors who do not understand the phenomenon. McLain (2009) explained that lack of information either by knowledge or experience may lead to supervisors feeling stressed or anxious.

This study increases the amount of information that supervisors can reference to assist supervisors acknowledge the phenomenon and promote dialogue about it. Furthermore, The participant responses in this study mirrored research by Rapisarda, Desmond, and Nelson (2011) who reported their participants having attributed their learning from not only educators but also from other supervisors during *supervision of supervision*. Rapisarda, Desmond, and Nelson found that counseling supervisor participants in their study reported learning the skill of fostering growth within the supervisory relationship from modeling what their supervisor did.

### **Limitations**

Being relatively inexperienced at being a qualitative researcher heightened the probability of this study having limitations. Other possible limitations of this study include my own personal biases' influence, the participant selection, and my use of a professional transcriptionist. First, my lack of relative experience may have been a factor for me missing opportunities to ask probing questions during the individual interviews.

To lesson this possible effect, I read through the transcripts of the initial interviews several times, looking for open-ended questions, encouragers, or lack thereof, before conducting the second round of interviews.

Indicative of qualitative research, I served as the primary instrument for data collection. Therefore it was crucial that I be aware of my own biases throughout all of the processes of this study. Before beginning my research I made an inventory of the risks and possible implications of my biased subjectivity and planned ways to reduce their influence on the study, data collection, and analysis. I kept a reflective journal, consulted with a peer debriefer, and utilized member checking to verify the accuracy of the transcripts and confirm emerging themes and patterns to ensure that I was not misrepresenting the participants' perceptions. I made frequent contact with my peer debriefer so that he could point out any indications of my biases swaying the study that I might not have been aware of.

I limited my participant group by selecting counseling supervisors who had at least two years experienced, had a state-counseling license, and held at least a masters degrees from a CACREP accredited university or college. I attempted to select participants based on criteria related to their credentials so that the demographic diversity of my participants was unintentional and random.

Because the interviews were recorded the responses needed to be typed for analysis purposes. I utilized a professional transcriptionist for that purpose, and with doing so I took steps to reduce the limitations that outsourcing the job of transcribing can bring. Along with signing a confidentiality agreement I discussed my expectations and the parameters of our collaboration.

I worked closely with the transcriptionist to ensure that the produced documented-interviews were accurate and comprehensive. Two digital recording devices were used so that two files of the same interview could be used to prevent loss of data due to unclear recordings. Before the maiden interview, I discussed formatting issues with the transcriptionist. I had this conversation in order to clarify questions regarding punctuation, reassure the transcriptionist that it was okay to not ‘clean up’ the dialogue (which was her professional habit to do so), and to request utterances, pauses, and audible non-verbals to be typed along with the conversation.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings from this qualitative phenomenological study indicate that counseling supervisors have various and similar perceptions, attitudes, and emotions in relation to the phenomenon of role ambiguity. Participants described having negative and positive attitudes regarding the multiple roles that make up their role of counseling supervisor. All of the participants also added other roles not heavily mentioned in the literature such as collaborator, coach, advisor, and consultant.

They spoke of benefiting from trudging through the impasse of ambiguity for it leads to personal and professional growth and overall wellbeing. They reported having a mix of feelings such as nervousness, intrigue, anxiety, fear, excitement, and peacefulness when experiencing role ambiguity. It is notable that they all attributed the shaping of their professional role to past experiences personal, academic, and professional in nature. The findings from this qualitative phenomenological study have begun to add additional narratives to the progression of research literature regarding counseling supervisors’

experiences with role ambiguity however future research on the phenomenon of role ambiguity experienced by counseling supervisors is needed.

Future research can begin by expanding this study by including a wider sample of practicing counseling supervisors from various locales in the United States. Along with broadening the geographies of participants, it will also be helpful to expand criteria specific to settings. Hoge, Migdole, Farkas, Ponce, and Hunnicutt (2011) found that ambiguity arises in the private and public sectors of the counseling field. Increasing the accumulation of relevant documents is encouraged as well.

Additional research would benefit from focusing its samples according to career maturity levels to raise awareness about effective education and practices that more appropriately correspond to counseling supervisors' developmental process. Watkins and Riggs (2012) noted that supervisors who experience more uncertainty and about their own competencies are more likely to engage in intentional and unintentional role reversals. Researchers in the future, along with their audiences, may benefit from an increased understanding of how role ambiguity is experienced with practitioners who have differing degrees of alignment with counseling, education, and evaluation. And research on the effects of educators' role modeling toleration of ambiguity in graduate and doctorate level instruction is also recommended.

This study's findings can inform future research on counselor educators, counseling supervisor educators, and current counseling supervisors. Gazzola, De Stafano, Theriault, and Audet (2013) found that for supervisors, when there were no clear markers on which to base their judgments, there was an increase in ambivalence and sense of doubt (p.24). Currently, there are few studies in the literature related to this topic

therefore the findings of this study may be considered *innovative*. The ACA Code of Ethics (2005) defines themes that are, “Innovative, without an empirical foundation, or without a well-grounded theoretical foundation” as “unproven” or “developing” (F.6.f.). Further research could expand the inclusion of more diverse sampling of professional counseling supervisors and also utilize both qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

By using what was reported by the participants in this study as an empirical basis, surveys to determine how prevalent the participant’s experiences are in the grander population of counseling supervisors may be developed. The findings of this study might also be used to further transform in-depth interview protocols as well as be used to better equip researchers as they gain entry into the field. Lastly, the themes that emerged from the data analysis might determine variables to assess for in experimental designed studies.

### **Conclusion**

The findings in this study support continued research and training in the art and science of supervision. Through giving voice to the participants’ lived experiences with role ambiguity, the findings of this qualitative phenomenological study has added new real-life stories about the conditions and situations in which counseling supervisors experience role ambiguity as well as a description of how counseling supervisors experience the typical and distinctive character of this complex phenomenon. This study and its results, serve as a foundation for future studies that aim at researching the relationship counseling supervisors have with role ambiguity. This essence consists of complex perceptions, attitudes, and feelings that come with being a counseling

supervisor. The results may help inform those who are concerned with improving and enhancing counseling supervisor education and practice.

I began this study with a verse from The Mishnah and I will conclude this paper with another passage from *Pirkei Avot*, (The Ethics of our Fathers). Verse four states:

Hillel would say: Do not separate yourself from the community. Do not believe in yourself until the day you die. Do not judge your fellow until you have stood in his place. Do not say something that is not readily understood in the belief that it will ultimately be understood [or: Do not say something that ought not to be heard even in the strictest confidence, for ultimately it will be heard]. And do not say "When I free myself of my concerns, I will study," for perhaps you will never free yourself.

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## Appendix A

### INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD EXEMPTION

*Eddie Hill, Ph.D., CPRP  
Assistant Professor  
Park, Recreation and Tourism Studies Program*



September 17, 2013

Approved Application Number 201401004

Dr. Theodore P. Remley, Jr.  
Department of Counseling and Human Services

Dear Dr. Remley:

Your Application for Exempt Research with Aaron G. Shames entitled, "Role Ambiguity of Counselor Supervisors," has been found to be EXEMPT from IRB review by the Human Subjects Review Committee of the Darden College of Education, and you may begin your research project when you are ready. You will receive a signed copy of this letter in the campus mail.

The determination that this study is EXEMPT from IRB review is for an indefinite period of time provided no significant changes are made to your study. If any significant changes occur, notify me or the chair of this committee at that time and provide complete information regarding such changes.

In the future, if this research project is funded externally, you must submit an application to the University IRB for approval to continue the study.

Best wishes in completing your study.

Sincerely,

Eddie Hill

Eddie Hill, Ph.D., CPRP  
Assistant Professor  
Old Dominion University  
Human Movement Sciences  
Darden College of Education Human Subjects Review Committee

*Old Dominion University, Student Recreation Center, Room 2019, Norfolk, VA 23529  
Phone: (757) 683-4881; Fax: (757) 683-4270  
E-mail: ehill@odu.edu*

*Accredited by the National Recreation and Park Association Council on Accreditation*

## Appendix B

### PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC FORM

*This form will be kept in a secure file by the researcher.*

ID Number (to be completed by researcher): \_\_\_\_\_  
*Any information derived from this form will be for use in this dissertation project or related publication(s) and will be credited by participant ID Number.*

#### I. General Bio and Contact Information:

- A. Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Race/Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_
- B. Name of University/College Affiliation (If Applicable):  
 \_\_\_\_\_
- C. Name of Business/Practice (If Applicable):  
 \_\_\_\_\_
- D. Phone number for contact regarding this study: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Email address for correspondence regarding this study: \_\_\_\_\_

#### II. Educational/Credentialing Information:

- A. In what field is/are your degree(s)?  
☐ Counseling ☐ Psychology ☐ Social Work ☐ Psychiatry  
☐ Education Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
- B. Highest degree(s) completed:  
☐ Masters ☐ Doctorate ☐ Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_  
☐ Degree in progress (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
- C. Please list any licenses, certifications, or other special trainings that you have, and what season and year you received/completed them\*:  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**III. Professional Experience:**

A. Number of years in clinical practice: \_\_\_\_\_

Role(s)/Setting(s)\*: \_\_\_\_\_

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B. Number of years in College/University setting: \_\_\_\_\_

Role(s)/Setting(s)\*: \_\_\_\_\_

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C. Number of years in supervisory practice: \_\_\_\_\_

Role(s)/Setting(s)\*: \_\_\_\_\_

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***\*Please include any additional comments here, or on the back of this form, if there are any areas that are not applicable to you or if there are potential reasons for your exclusion from continued participation:***



## Appendix C

### Interview Protocol

*This is a loose and working guideline for this interview. If it were structured and not malleable it would defeat the basic intent and invitation to make a full composite of your experiences with role ambiguity when supervising counselors and counselors-in-training.*

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Circle: Initial Interview      Follow-Up Interview

Time of interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Place(s)/Setting of interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: Aaron Gabriel Shames

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Points of Inquiry:

#### I. Opening:

- A. How did you first hear about counseling supervision?
- B. What were your initial impressions of the role of the counseling supervisor?
- C. How did you become interested in becoming a counseling supervisor?

#### II. Central:

- A. Tell me about your experiences and perceptions with role ambiguity when providing counseling supervision to students. I am particularly interested in your experiences with students who are in practicum or internship.
- B. What are your thoughts about Bernard's notion that counseling supervisors sometimes take on the roles of counselor, educator, and evaluator?

- C. Please tell me if you believe that these roles are clear or ambiguous and how you relate to them as a counseling supervisor.
- D. What are your feelings about the appropriateness of these roles being the makeup for the counseling supervisor role?
- E. What place do these roles have within the counseling supervisory relationship?

IV. Follow-up:

*I will ask the following subquestions either in the initial interview or the follow-up interview*

- A. What are your experiences and perceptions concerning which strategies or methods are most useful when resolving role ambiguity?
- B. In your opinion, what factors have contributed to your effectiveness as a counselor supervisor?
- C. What would you tell new counseling supervisors just starting out?
- D. Is there any information that was not included on the Provider Demographic Information document that you would like to add?

## **Appendix D**

### **INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY**

#### **PROJECT TITLE:**

Role Ambiguity of Counseling Supervisors

#### **INTRODUCTION**

The purposes of this form are to give you information that may affect your decision whether to say YES or NO to participation in this research, and to record the consent of those who say YES.

#### **RESEARCHER and PRIMARY INVESTIGATOR**

Aaron Gabriel Shames, LPC, M.A.  
Old Dominion University, College of Education, Counseling & Human Services  
Department

#### **DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH STUDY**

Several studies have been conducted looking into the subject of role ambiguity and more specifically role ambiguity within a supervisory context. There have been studies regarding its attributes, functions, effects, and people's attitudes towards it. Research thus far has been prominent in the fields of education, business, mental health counseling, and medical services. Recently, researchers have begun to be able to gain entry into the field of counseling supervision focusing on role ambiguity's presence within the supervisory relationship. None of them have explained the essence of role ambiguity as experienced by counseling supervisors within the counseling relationship. The purpose of my research is to investigate and study role ambiguity as it is experienced by counseling supervisors within the counseling relationship setting.

If you decide to participate, then you will join a study involving research of your and other counseling supervisors' attitudes and perceptions of role ambiguity. This will consist of me keeping regular contact with you via email, phone, postal, Skype. My contact includes correspondence to schedule interviews, the actual interviews that will be conducted via Skype and/or phone. I will be sending you documents to review and keep as well as documents for you to sign and return regarding the parameters of this study, consent to record, and demographic sheet. If you say YES, then your participation will include one 90 minute interview, one 45 minute follow-up interview, document reviews, data analysis, and wrap-up within the duration of 30 days from confirmed consent. Your participation will be set in your area. I will be interviewing you with the use of Skype or telephone; I will be in my area of Norfolk, VA.

Approximately 7 counseling supervisors similarly situated as yourself will be participating in this study.

### **EXCLUSIONARY CRITERIA**

You should have completed a demographic questionnaire, which includes space and a given area for noting of any exclusionary criterion you might. To the best of your knowledge, you do not meet and did not list exclusionary criteria that would keep you from participating in this study.

### **RISKS AND BENEFITS**

**RISKS:** If you decide to participate in this study, then you may face a risk of experiencing feelings of discomfort and cognitive dissonance. An undesirable outcome would have no trace of new knowledge and is highly unlikely. The researcher tried to reduce these risks by way of informed consent and disclosures secured with professional confidentiality. And, as with any research, there is some possibility that you may be subject to risks that have not yet been identified.

**BENEFITS:** The main benefit to you for participating in this study is an opportunity to have the chance to discover the essence of role ambiguity as experienced by counseling supervisors while in a supervisory relationship.

### **COSTS AND PAYMENTS**

The researchers want your decision about participating in this study to be absolutely voluntary. Yet they recognize that your participation may pose some strains on time, budget, productivity, etc. and for what it's worth- I empathize.

The researchers are unable to give you any payment for participating in this study.

### **NEW INFORMATION**

If the researchers find new information during this study that would reasonably change your decision about participating, then they will inform you.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

All information obtained about you in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations and publications, but the researcher will not identify you.

### **WITHDRAWAL PRIVILEGE**

It is OK for you to say NO. Even if you say YES now, you are free to say NO later, and walk away or withdraw from the study -- at any time. If applicable, your decision will not affect your relationship with Old Dominion University, or otherwise cause a loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled.

### **COMPENSATION FOR ILLNESS AND INJURY**

If you say YES, then your consent in this document does not waive any of your legal rights. However, in the event that injury or harm arises from this study, neither Old

Dominion University nor the researchers are able to give you any money, insurance coverage, free medical care, or any other compensation for such injury. In the event that you suffer injury as a result of participation in any research project, you may contact Dr. Eddie Hill, Member of the Darden College of Education Human Subjects Review Committee, Old Dominion University, at ehill@odu.edu, who will be glad to review the matter with you.

### **VOLUNTARY CONSENT**

By signing this form, you are saying several things. You are saying that you have read this form or have had it read to you, that you are satisfied that you understand this form, the research study, and its risks and benefits. The researchers should have answered any questions you may have had about the research. If you have any questions later on, then the researchers should be able to answer them:

Primary Researcher: Aaron Shames (757) 477-4557 asham002@odu.edu

If at any time you feel pressured to participate, or if you have any questions about your rights or this form, then you should contact Dr. Eddie Hill, Member of the Darden College of Education Human Subjects Review Committee, Old Dominion University, at ehill@odu.edu.

And importantly, by signing below, you are telling the researcher YES, that you agree to participate in this study.

<b>Participant's Printed Name &amp; Signature</b>	<b>Date</b>
<b>Legally Authorized Representative's Printed Name &amp; Signature (If participant is an incapacitated adult)</b>	<b>Date</b>

**INVESTIGATOR'S STATEMENT**

I certify that I have explained to this participant the nature and purpose of this research, including benefits, risks, costs, and any experimental procedures. I have described the rights and protections afforded to human subjects and have done nothing to pressure, coerce, or falsely entice this subject into participating. I am aware of my obligations under state and federal laws, and promise compliance. I have answered the participant's questions and have encouraged him/her to ask additional questions at any time during the course of this study. I have witnessed the above signature(s) on this consent form.

<b>Investigator's Printed Name &amp; Signature</b>	<b>Date</b>
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### **Vitae**

Aaron Gabriel Shames earned a Bachelor's of Arts degree in Psychology in 2003 from Washington & Jefferson College and a Master's of Arts degree in Community Agency Counseling from East Tennessee State University in 2006. He is a national certified counselor and is a licensed professional counselor in the Commonwealth of Virginia. Mr. Shames is also a member of the Board of Directors for Creating Survivors Corporation.

Mr. Shames has served as a clinician in a residential treatment center and is currently a psychotherapist with a private practice group in Norfolk, Virginia. He has taught master's level counseling courses. Mr. Shames has also served as a supervisor to counseling students completing their practicum and internship field experience.

Mr. Shames is a member of two professional organizations including the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) and the American Counseling Association (ACA). He has attended and participated in national and international conferences and counseling institutes.